

TITLE: Wicked Game

AUTHOR: KellyB/Pagan

PAIRINGS: Anakin and Padme

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SUMMARY: This is a missing moment scene which takes place right after Anakin wakes up from his nightmare on Naboo. Although this isn't part of Succumb/The End Justifies the Means, the events that occurred in those two fic's (up to the fireplace scene where Padme rejects Anakin) have occurred. This is just for fun and offers another scenario for their first time. This story alternates between Anakin and Padme's POV. As usual this is not happy fun time Anakin and Padme - I don't do sappy.

TIME PERIOD: During AOTC.

TYPE: Romance, seduction, angst

RATING: Overall NC-17

WARNINGS: If you want to read a Disneyfied story of Anakin and Padme, stop reading NOW! This story focuses on the unhealthy aspect of their relationship. Namely, that Anakin has a rather unhealthy fixation on Padme

DISCLAIMER: I'm just a simple woman trying to make my way in the universe. I intend no infringement on the Lucasfilm characters, situations, or storylines. I'm making absolutely NO money off of this so suing would really be pointless, George dear. This rendering is merely for the titillation of rabid Star Wars fans like me who have WAY too much time on their hands. Bless us one and all.

CRITIQUE: Constructive criticism and comments welcomed - I'll hear whatever you have to say. Please respond to kellyb701@hotmail.com

ARCHIVE: Sure, just let me know where so I can visit.

NOTE: Force thoughts (if any) are designated by: //thought//. Normal thoughts are designated by: *italics* thoughts. Any direct lines from AOTC and TPM (movie or novel) appear in *italics* and quotations.

NOTE: 1/21/06 - Correcting formatting problems from site crash back in winter of '05. Tweaked story slightly as well but basically nothing new added.

Chapter 1: Nightmares

***"When I was a child, I spoke as a child,
I understood as a child;
But when I became a man,***

I put away childish things."

"1 Corinthians 13:11

"No!"

The sharp word rang out loudly, yanking me from the realm of nightmares where my mother writhed in pain, her body bent and broken beyond repair. Blood - so much blood smeared over skin marred with ugly cuts and bruises. For the briefest of moments, I imagined I could actually smell the sickly sweet coppery tang mixed with the odor of burning sand.

The nauseating illusion was shattered when a cool breeze off the lake swept in through the half opened window. It feathered across my bare skin sheened lightly with the perspiration born from terror. The memory of the hot wind of my childhood dissipated slowly, fading away beneath the comforting fresh green scent that was Naboo. Without my voice shouting in protest the room was tomb-like in its silence. Only the violent hammering of my heart and the rush of blood in my ears disturbed the middle of the night quiet.

I stared sightlessly up at the plastered ceiling cracked with age but still beautiful with its swirls of blue and white meant to mimic a summer sky. How could there be so much beauty amongst so much death? A voice shrieked in my head setting my teeth on edge. Gods, I could still feel her agony as if it were my own.

Twice in as many hours I'd woken to the now eerily familiar dream; the one that told me my mother was in grave danger and suffering intolerable pain. Obi Wan said it was just a dream; that it would pass in time. And I desperately clung to his proffered words of comfort like a child to his security blanket.

But . . . if what he said were true why did I keep having the same one over and over? Why did I see her so vividly? Most importantly, why did I feel like time was running out?

I threw back the covers abruptly, a sickening spiral of uncontrollable hopelessness plummeting through me. I had to believe it was just a recurring nightmare because there was nothing I could do about my mother, not now, not when I had Padme to look after and protect.

//Not when you're in the perfect position to win her over//

No sooner did that thought filter through my fear addled brain than the events of the previous evening came rushing back to punch me viciously in the gut, the pain so intense I physically blanched. Utter desolation lanced my heart. Padme had rejected me. She'd rejected me just like Obi Wan had done when Qui Gon first voiced his intent to bring me with them to Coruscant; just as the Jedi Council had when the Jedi Master brought me to them to be trained. While I had poured my heart out she'd sat there squirming uncomfortably, looking like she wished she were anywhere in the universe but at my side. With each nervous fidget, every restless shift of her body, my rambling declarations had sounded more and more desperate. The rejection, when it came, had hurt like nothing I'd ever experienced before.

But then she had slipped and hope had stirred in my breast.

"If you follow your thoughts through to conclusion, they will take us to a place we cannot go . . .

regardless of the way we feel for each other." She'd said.

Regardless of the way we feel for each other. Padme finally admitted something was there between us and for one shining moment I thought I'd achieved what I'd been dreaming about, what I'd been plotting and planning for almost ten years. But the gods give with one hand and take away with the other.

It was only false hope wrapped in cold words.

"Then you do feel something!" I grasped on to her promising words like a drowning man to a piece of waterlogged driftwood only to have it unceremoniously yanked away.

"I will not give in to this. I have more important things to do than fall in love." Padme's voice was coldly determined and so horribly final.

The warm glow spreading in my chest like the buzz from some intense pleasure drug abruptly turned to a freezing chill. The joyous beat of my heart came to a stuttering halt as her meaning sunk into my conscience. How could you decide not to love? Love wasn't a choice; you couldn't just pick and choose as if it were of no more consequence than which outfit you wore! The absurdness of it all raced around and around my head while a low voice whispered to me from the back of my mind. Where before I would've tried to ignore it, to push it back down to the black pit from which it came, this time I listened to its seductive promise.

//Be discreet, be patient and you will prevail//

Instinctively I slipped further into the shadows, moving away from the heat of the brazier fire, away from the warmth of her. The night was mild but cold fingers of despair reached out to take hold of me in their icy grip. A shiver shook my frame. My rational side insisted on telling me I'd lost my battle to make Padme mine and that I should accept defeat like a gentleman. But I'd been raised for the first half of my life on a planet that didn't know the meaning of graceful defeat. On Tatooine you fought with all you had or you lost everything. As Padme watched me with troubled eyes, I knew it wasn't over. Deep within I knew if I obeyed that dangerous thrumming voice welling up inside I would triumph. It was a truth I acknowledged deep in my bones.

//Pull back and regroup so you can survive to fight another day//

I swallowed my hurt and pretended to agree with her assertion that living a lie would undoubtedly destroy us, telling her what she wanted to hear. It was a delaying tactic, a ruse to allay her shock and distaste at my unwelcome suggestion we conduct a secret and illicit relationship.

Padme continued to regard me with a wary expression but I barely noticed. Already I was shifting through various ideas and scenarios, discarding first one and then another. Somehow I knew I would have to lure her away from this world where she felt safe and secure. I needed to isolate her from all that was familiar so she would only have me to rely upon. The only question was how to achieve that seemingly impossible state of affairs.

My reverie was interrupted when the balcony doors rattled violently on their hinges as a strong gust of wind picked up outside. While I'd been lost in thought a storm had begun to move in. Bits of grit and sand pinged against the glass panes, a familiar sound for someone who'd grown up

on a desert planet with frequent sand storms. A brief wave of my hand closed the window with a decided click and the growing unrest outside faded to a muted howl.

"I will not give in to this."

Padme's refusal rose up again to taunt me. I wanted to scream from the ache in my chest. Never had I imagined I could hurt so much. I sat up with an impatient jerk, sucking in deep gulps of air in a useless attempt to clear my head, and then froze. Amongst the expected scents mingling in the still air I detected something familiar, a hint of the scent Padme wore. I inhaled deeper, drawing in the tantalizing essence. Yes, there it was again, a light floral scent with a hint of rich vanilla. The heady combination of her perfume and soap mixed with her own sweet fragrance was unmistakable. Padme had been in my room and she'd been there recently.

Needful desire struck me low and hard.

"I will not give in to this."

Then what exactly had she been doing in my room? A bright, hot flare of anger speared me, flushing the last lingering remnants of my cruel dream away. Padme once again consumed my thoughts and it wasn't in a pleasant manner. A guttural noise rumbled from me seconds before I hurriedly swung my legs over the edge of the bed. I remained unmoving as something dark and indefinable burst inside me. Before I could stop myself, I reached out and impetuously swept everything atop the antique bedside table to the floor in one harsh motion. The resounding crash barely registered as the remembered hurt and humiliation replayed in my head.

It wasn't fair! I'd laid my heart on my sleeve and she'd rejected me despite her admitted feelings for me. She was choosing to throw away what we could have for the sake of a temporary position she'd confessed she'd accepted only because Queen Jamilla had asked her to take it up. Padme had let me ramble on and on and then shot me down while wearing a dress that would've gotten her arrested in several systems.

My head snapped around. I glowered at the old fashioned ornately carved bedroom door as if it were the reason behind my growing frustration. The lines of my face tightened, my lips drawing back into a snarl of annoyance. If I'd had any lingering doubts about Padme's nocturnal visit it was dispelled by that sight. Barely imperceptible but proof nonetheless, the heavy wooden door was noticeably ajar. My furtive visitor had apparently left in such haste she'd failed to secure it properly when she'd made good her escape.

What kind of wicked game did she think she was playing? Nothing in my life had prepared me for these bizarre push-pull flirtations Padme seemed so adept at playing. The mixed messages were driving me to distraction. The kiss on the balcony, her response to me on our picnic followed by her subsequent flight, the glances she shot through veiled lashes when she thought I wasn't looking, her chilly withdrawals - they all added up to a conflicting picture that had my insides twisted into knots. One minute I was being given all the signs that pointed to go and the next I was yanked to a painfully screeching halt. Who was she to treat me like that?

Ten years of being with the Jedi had not done much to quell my feelings of inferiority. When I'd discovered that Padme was not a handmaiden but the elected queen of her home world everything had changed. Never mind that she wouldn't be in that position forever, she would always be a queen in some sense. How could royalty love someone who had once been a lowly slave? The daily reminder by the other Padawans that I was at the Temple due only to a dying

man's wish had not exactly done wonders for my sense of belonging. The premonition of marrying Padme had been the one constant in my life and now a horrifying thought was threatening my most precious dream. What if I had been wrong all this time?

Normally, the sense of being unworthy would have inspired a gloomy depression. It was something Obi Wan was familiar with after ten years of being my Master. But now the feeling inspired something else altogether. The mocking voice in my head fanned the flames, instigating an ever widening circle of anger, waking that deep rooted sense of the injustice of it all. I needed an outlet, and soon. I needed to take matters into my own hands or I was sure the painful ache in my chest would never stop.

The enticing fragrance of warm vanilla and flowers intensified, growing overpowering within the confines of my room. It was all around me, in my nose, my mouth, my throat. The memory of her musical laughter, so enchanting on our picnic, now seemed a cruel amusement, a secret joke at my expense.

"You will always be the little boy I knew on Tatooine."

Was she laughing at me, the poor, infatuated boy? My stomach dipped and rolled with a terrible thought. Dorm wasn't here but if she had been I suddenly wondered if my heartfelt but clumsy confession detailing my true feelings would've been the subject of derisive laughter; or even worse, contempt and pity. The conjured image of the two women tittering in amusement at my audacity and cheek was too much for the fragile hold I had so far managed to maintain on my self control.

The air practically crackled around me, the growing animosity fueled by my hurt palatable as my thoughts moved from gray to the blackest of black. Padme had wanted me that day in the meadow. Her body had been warm and pliant beneath mine, her arms twined around my neck and she'd kissed me back . . . with a little persuasion on my part. A cold, grim smile of satisfaction twisted my lips. I could do that again. All it would take was for me to do what she had just done - invade the sanctity of her room. She wasn't immune to me, not by a long shot. Padme could protest all she wanted. No amount of clipped words spoken in her cold politician's voice would convince me otherwise.

I'd been relatively restrained since arriving on Naboo, the picnic notwithstanding. I'd tried not to push her too far, too fast and look where it had gotten me - shunted aside like worthless flotsam floating in space. Maybe more overt forms of persuasion were called for. Maybe I'd backed off too soon in the meadow. Treating her like spun glass wasn't the answer.

If it was possible my mood plunged even further into the bottomless well of despair that constantly resided inside me. So if it wasn't virginal reluctance stopping her then it must be the damnable Order, I decided. She was just being stubborn in some misguided attempt to keep me from going against the outdated Jedi Code. Her body had heard the call just as mine had. She just needed a little help to hear it more clearly.

I slipped from the bed with a glowering frown. The glazed tiles felt cool beneath the soles of my feet as I started for the door. The air of grim determination left me feeling edgy, shaky, like I'd drunk too much kaffee and hadn't gotten enough sleep.

I couldn't get the haunting visual of Padme with someone else out of my head. She was a career politician, a woman who moved in social circles where sex was a commodity to be traded

for favors. I didn't for one minute think she'd play that sort of game but I had little doubt she'd dabbled in a discrete affair or two.

How many other rooms has she snuck into in the dead of night? How many lovers has she had? The poisoned thoughts brushed against my mind, snapping at me from the darkest corners of my psyche and stopping me in my tracks. The thought of Padme with other men made me sick to the center of my being. The revelation about Palo paled in significance to the almost certain knowledge that as a woman of almost twenty-five, she had surely been intimate with someone by now.

So have you, whispered my conscience. I shrugged the voice of reason aside in favor of the growing tide of jealousy threatening to swamp me. I'd never really considered the likely possibility, had definitely never wanted to entertain the horrible idea at all. But how likely was it that she would've waited for me when she didn't believe we were meant to be together? I'd had faith, why hadn't she?

Immediately my mind dredged up the torturous vision of another man's hand smoothing over her soft flesh, someone else's lips tasting her, kissing the silky skin of her neck, inhaling the scent of her hair. The idea that someone else had possessed what was mine made me flinch. A brilliant red mist of jealous rage washed down to screen out those appalling images. Padme was mine, damn it! Not only had someone dared touch her but she had given herself freely. The jealous murmurs twisted logic and sense into a tangled mess that I was not inclined to try and sort out. Not when my body and soul was clamoring for my heart's desire.

At my sides my hands balled into tight fists. I was shaking uncontrollably as I fought to quell my irrational feelings. Maybe I wasn't the first in her life but I would be the last if it killed me. I could make her forget the ones that came before me. Of all the things in the universe, of that I was positive.

The seduction in the meadow had failed because I'd been trying to give her the time to come to realize we belonged together. That was a mistake. I obviously had to make her believe it. I strode purposefully forward. My entire body was on fire. I was feverish with a heady surge of anticipation. She had feelings for me. If she hadn't proved that in the meadow, she'd admitted as much in front of the fire. No more changing the rules of the game. It was time to see those feelings through to fruition. I was going to talk and this time Padme would listen. This time refusal wasn't going to be an offered choice.

Chapter 2: Danger Coming - Part 1

"The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden itself."

Oscar Wilde

"If you are suffering as much as I am, please tell me!"

If he only knew.

My peace of mind, my mental well being, was being drained from me with all the strength of a raging water spout. The sensation my life was careening out of control, prevalent from the first moment Anakin had looked at me like a man starved, had only increased since arriving at the lake retreat. Far from being put off by my abrupt withdrawal from the ill-advised kiss we had shared that first day, Anakin had merely taken a step back and waited for the next opportune moment. It was like being stalked by a sleek, untamed animal of prey.

Every second of every day that followed meant struggling to ignore his heated glances, heavy with unspoken promises and thick with a type of obsessive desire that kept me tossing and turning at night. And when I thought it could not possibly get any worse, the events of the picnic unfolded like a bad dream. I turned my face into my pillow as if I could somehow smother the memory of how badly my body had betrayed me.

Heat suffused my face as my traitorous mind insisted on dragging me back in time. It had started as an innocent tumble down an incline; a swift kiss given as payment for release and then my world had turned upside down. The sweetly boyish and clumsy Anakin vanished and in his place was a man well versed in the art of seduction. At first I had been too stunned to try and muster my defenses, the change in him too sudden for me to comprehend. By the time I had gotten over my initial shock, it had been too late. My body had succumbed to his touch, to his lips, to the passion he had drawn from me far too easily.

"I think I rather like to hear you beg, milady.

I groaned out loud. Gods, I could still feel the heavy weight of his body pressing me down into the sweet smelling grass. I could feel the heat from his body permeating my skin as if he were even now moving over me. It had been days ago and still I imagined I could smell his scent on my skin, taste the masculine flavor of him in my mouth.

What was wrong with me? Why did it have to be Anakin who stormed my defenses so successfully?

With monumental effort, I forced away the rest of those disturbing memories. To dwell on them was dangerous and far too tempting to admit. A swift rise of almost claustrophobic panic set in and I kicked out at the clinging sheets frantically. Free at last, I scrambled to a sitting position atop the tangled bed linens and hugged my knees close to my chest. This had to stop, I thought with an uncharacteristic shiver of fear.

I stared pensively out through the mullioned panes imagining the wind whipping at the flowering vines covering the balcony. Idly, I wondered if there would be any blooms left once the system had moved on. Should the storm blow over as predicted, in another four hours the sun would rise to spread its golden rays on the rolling green hills and the lapping waters of the lake. Another day would begin. Another day of tension and the sense that something volatile was simmering just beneath the surface of the polite platitudes Anakin and I had fallen into after the awkward ending to our picnic. It would only be worse now that I had refused him outright.

Last night - had it been only a few hours earlier? - I had smashed Anakin's hopes with a noticeable lack of empathy. Bits and pieces of that uncomfortable scene flew at me from the secret recesses where I had tried to lock them up. I had hurt him. Did he even realize how hard it had been for me to take away his dream?

Anakin.

Flickering fire light cast its glowing reflection in cerulean blue eyes. My lungs constricted in the tight bodice of a gown I should have known better than to wear. Desire, hot and heavy, rolling off of the boy-man in front of me in such concentrated waves I felt them as if they were a tangible entity.

Never in my life had I seen eyes so filled with painful desperation, so hungry for acceptance and love. Anakin's fierce gaze had been scorching hot, blazing away with far too many emotions to name. Truth be told, I was afraid to name them. To name them would make them real and to allow that to happen would be a mistake. But it had happened anyway. In the reflection of those begging eyes I saw everything he felt, everything he dreamed. He made no effort to hold anything back and the intensity, the overwhelming feeling that I was responsible for it all froze me to the spot. An odd combination of dread and excitement trickled along my spine even now, hours later. Anakin needed me. He wanted me so much he had been shaking with it.

It was all for me.

Me.

I was so far out of my depth my feet could not reach the bottom. By my own choice I had no experience with men and desire. When I had told Anakin I had more important things to do than fall in love, I had meant it . . . on some level. It was something I had told myself countless times in the past and it had always worked - until now. My usual defenses, so often relied upon to keep me safe from the dangerous quicksand of love and relationships, were failing me at an alarming rate. Constantly, I found myself doing one thing and saying another - like wearing that dress.

Unconsciously my eyes strayed from the rain streaked panes of glass to the chair where the instrument of a disaster waiting to happen lay in a discarded heap. My only saving grace was that I had not picked it out; that, at least, could be laid at the door of the maid who had set it out for me while I had been in the fresher. Still, I could have chosen another and I had not. It was ridiculous to blame a dress for what had transpired but I could not shake the feeling that I had led him on somehow by giving into my vanity.

Perhaps I could also blame my slip of tongue on the lack of oxygen caused by the tight corset, I thought with a humorless snort.

"If you follow your thoughts through to conclusion, they will take us to a place we cannot go . . . regardless of the way we feel for each other." The damning admittance had tumbled from my lips before I could stop it.

I closed my eyes and swallowed hard, guilty unease washing over me. With all my heart I wished I had never uttered those words which had unintentionally given him a glimmer of hope. Why had I added that last part? What had I been thinking? But that was the problem, I had not been thinking. I had been too busy trying to suppress the feelings his heartfelt speech, so sweet and honest, had so unexpectedly inspired. In my hurry to distance myself from my unacceptable emotions, I forgot this was the same Anakin who had very nearly done what no man had before. I forgot that he was not as innocent as he often pretended to be when we were in the company of others.

"I will not give in to this."

My declaration, so adamant and final sounding then, now echoed in my head over and over in a mocking litany. It had been too little, too late. Useless words said in a futile attempt to stave off the zealousness of an infatuated young man. The effort had been woefully inadequate and my pitiful attempt had taunted me as I watched him walk away, the ease with which he had accepted my refusal vaguely disturbing. Later my misspoken words had accompanied every toss and turn of my restless body as I tried to sleep. My agitated movements had twisted the sheets around me until they were as confining as any funeral shroud. It was an unsettling analogy I instantly shied away from but the chill remained.

Anakin.

Hot blue eyes pierced the thin veil of darkness cloaking my closed eyelids. The memory of his pain filled gaze illuminated in the shifting firelight haunted me. With every flash of remembrance my mind insisted on replaying, I cringed inwardly. Yet I knew I was in the right. The very idea there could be anything between us, a Jedi and a senator, was not only incomprehensible but sheer lunacy.

Wasn't it?

The tiny tremors coursing through me grew stronger as I fought to still my churning thoughts and calm my even more fractured emotions. Anakin was an infatuated boy with stars in his eyes. It was nothing more than that. He would get over it and life would return to normal. More importantly, I would be able to forget and leave it all behind me.

This type of situation played out across the galaxy every day like some tired cliché, a younger man imagining himself in love with an older woman; a crush mistaken for a deeper, truer emotion. And what of me? No one could deny Anakin was a handsome young man, a dashing figure, and the fact that he wore his heart on the sleeve of his Jedi robe was flattering. But I did not think of him as anything more than a friend, I told myself firmly. That was all.

Liar!

He's just an infatuated boy, I insisted stubbornly to that mocking inner voice. But my mind scoffed at my pathetic attempt at trying to turn Anakin back into the small child with whom I had once regarded with such innocent affection. I had never been one to suffer fools gladly and yet there I was trying to play make believe.

"He's just a boy." I had said to Sola.

However, 'boy' was hardly a word I could use to accurately describe the Anakin who had come back into my life less than a month ago. There could be no mistaking that he was as far from that charmingly sweet ten year old I had once known as I was from the trusting girl who believed the senate would come to Naboo's aid in the face of the Trade Federation's illegal blockade. The picnic more than anything else had proved just how much Anakin had changed beyond a shadow of a doubt.

"I will not give in to this."

Yet at the first panicked shout from the throes of his nightmare, I had run to his room without a second thought. I had not even stopped to don my robe. My only concern was reaching Anakin,

comforting Anakin, soothing his nightmare away.

Stupid, Padme, stupid! I did not want to consider what Anakin's reaction would have been to find me in his room in the middle of the night wearing only my nightgown; especially after my little speech about responsibility and duty, when I had taken his dream and inadvertently crushed it beneath the heel of my shoe.

The still glowing fire beckoned me from my cold perch; drawing me from my bed where I doubted I would see any more sleep that night. Despite the fact it was early summer, my hands were like ice and I slid off the high mattress, grabbing my robe as I moved to stoke the orange-red embers to help ward off the growing chill.

Outside the summer storm was continuing to grow in intensity and strength. The doors to the balcony shook on their ancient hinges, the loud noise in the otherwise quiet room making me fidget nervously. A sharp crack of thunder rumbled from the sky, the vibrations shaking the solid stone floor beneath my feet. An explosive flash flared, lighting the room as brightly as if it were the middle of the day. The time between the thunder and lightning was shortening, a clear sign that the tempest was creeping ever closer.

I had always loved storms. Something inside me responded to the savageness of the rain lashed trees blowing in the wind; the leaden gray skies rent by brilliant charges of electric zigzags; and the accompanying loud rumbles of thunder. The unpredictability and wildness spoke to a part of me I normally kept buried; the part that was weary of order and rigid protocol - the very stagnation of the bureaucratic quagmire of politics.

But this storm was different. It had come barreling down from the mountains, barging rudely into the night with little warning just like Anakin had come back into my life. The volatile weather and my weariness from keeping on constant guard was exacerbated by the events of the past few weeks. Anakin was wreaking havoc with my habitual poised demeanor and the stress was beginning to show. Little by little the chinks in my hard won defensive armor were growing more numerous, widening into gaping cracks. I did not recognize the girl being revealed as my protection fell away in pieces. It had been years since I had seen her last.

Another earsplitting boom reverberated in the night. I shifted agitatedly from foot to foot, the tiny hairs on the back of my neck rising. A shard of lightning struck just across the lake shocking me with its raw intensity. I made a valiant attempt to force my increasing unease down but the deep, steadying breaths did nothing to sooth my jangled nerves.

With each crash of thunder and lightning I found myself holding my breath, the tension in my body rising up a notch with every new strike. Standing immobile was an impossibility. I had to move, had to work off the nervous energy coursing through me and making my limbs tremble and my nails press into the flesh of my palms. I knew if I cared to look I would find perfect crescent indentations marring the skin. Any minute and I might even draw blood.

A groaning sound drew my distracted attention away from the fire and in the direction of the balcony. Drawn forward, I found myself halfway between my bed and the balcony doors, watching in fascination as they rattled and shook under the influence of angry, unseen hands. The clattering noise grew louder, taking precedence over everything else, even the furious onslaught now pounding against the retreat's thick walls.

My heart thudded heavily in my chest. A tingle of anticipation sang along my nerves, telling me

in no uncertain terms that something was about to happen. Another virulent blast shook the doors and then they flew open with a deafening crash. The invading wind whipped at my hair and clothes, bringing with it a frenzied swirl of wet petals and leaves to litter the floor. The damp wind plastered my nightclothes to my body, jarring me from my dazed state. I raced to the doorway, fighting the buffeting gale in a battle to secure the doors against the powerful forces of nature. For once the antiquated doors held no charm and I regretted they were not the convenient mechanical doors we took for granted in the rest of the galaxy. Sometimes beauty and grace were a poor substitute for practical dependability.

After a brief but tiring tussle, I finally managed to slam the twin doors shut. The fierce sounds of the storm abated to a dull roar and I quickly moved to snap first the bottom and then the top lock into place. I rested my forehead against the frame, taking a moment to catch my breath and steady my shaking hands. Maybe I could get some sleep after all, I thought with a tired sigh. I turned away from the wild scene still playing out on the other side of the door just as another jag of lightning streaked across the sky and lit the room. My heart slammed hard against my ribcage and I backed up so quickly the hard metal handles banged painfully into one hip.

Standing not more than four meters away was Anakin, the harsh glare casting the angles and planes of his face in such sharp relief as to make him almost unrecognizable. Just in time my hand managed to stop the scream that instinctively tried to work its way past my lips. Although I doubted it would have been heard by anyone but us, I did not want to find out otherwise - not with a half dressed man lurking in my room at such an hour.

The light from the storm faded, leaving a black silhouette with glittering eyes holding me entranced. We stood there, both as still as the cold marble statues that dotted the retreat's terraced gardens, for what seemed like an eternity. It was an endless stretch of time spent pinned to the spot by a gaze so fierce I could feel it like the physical touch of his hand.

To my unusually fanciful mind it was as if I had somehow conjured him with just my thoughts. One minute I had been alone and the next I was facing the altogether imposing figure of the last person I wanted to see. At my back the doors shivered against the restraining locks. I reached behind me and grasped the cold slick metal knobs with clammy hands to hide their betraying tremor from the Jedi's all seeing gaze.

Thunder.

Lightning.

The blood pumped furiously in my veins, my pulse beating a wild rhythm that struck a ragged staccato in my ears. My mouth went as dry as the desert planet Anakin had grown up on and goose bumps rose up on my arms. I had to fight hard to keep my knees from buckling beneath me even as I reminded myself that this was Anakin before me, not some faceless intruder intent on my assassination.

No, but he is intent on another goal that could prove just as devastating. The ugly thought slithered through my mind sending a cold tremor straight through my heart. Oh gods, what should I do? The protocols of politics had prepared me for almost any eventuality but not this.

Tension scraped sharply along my tattered nerves, the razor fine talons digging into the sensitive endings without mercy. Just when I did not think I could possibly bear the charged silence a moment longer, Anakin cut through the thick atmosphere with a rasping voice, soft and

deadly in its intent.

"Come here."

Chapter 3: Danger Coming - Part 2

The sound of Anakin's voice set the alarm bells ringing violently in my head. An unpleasant tingling pricked along my scalp and nape, the icy hot darts crawling over the tender skin like tiny spiders. The ancient response to danger skittered down the base of my spine before spreading out to invade my rapidly stiffening limbs. He had never sounded so authoritative before, so sure of himself. All traces of the impetuous boy who had looked so confused after I broke that very first mistaken kiss were gone and I had the uncanny sensation the reigns of control had somehow slipped from my hands and landed in his.

No, it was more like they had been wrenched from my unsteady grip, I corrected myself with dismay. A rising panic blossomed in my belly like an erupting volcano.

Years of diplomatic training withered away under the onslaught of power emanating from Anakin. The tables had turned and I was at a loss to explain exactly how it had occurred. Suddenly I was fourteen years old again but instead of finding myself outflanked by a Jedi Master over three times my age, I was being stared down by a barely twenty year old Padawan. Such was my confusion; I actually took a few obedient steps towards him before the arrogance of his demand hit me like a slap in the face.

I gave a confused shake of my head, desperately trying to ward off the bizarre desire to just submit to his will and go to him as he was commanding. Poisoned words coalesced and I opened my mouth to put Anakin in his place in much the same way I had done in full view of the queen and her advisors. But the scathing verbal cut meant to chastise him for his insolence died on the tip of my tongue. The feral gleam in his eye stole my attention, my breath; my very thoughts. The harsh words of protest about to be wielded like a reliable weapon simply refused to come under Anakin's compelling stare.

I despised the weakness he inspired in me but to my dismay found I had no mental tricks left to counter it.

Not satisfied with my non-response, Anakin let his hot gaze wander from my face down the length of my body with a lazy impudence. There was no pretence of it being anything but a sexually charged appraisal, appreciative but insultingly frank. The indignant noise I made brought his roving eyes back to mine, a heart stopping lascivious smile hovering on his lips.

Overly conscious of the way the shimmersilk clung to my body now that Anakin had made me so painfully aware of it, I quickly drew the edges of my robe together with fumbling hands and then wrapped my arms protectively across my middle. I prayed the dim light was hiding the embarrassment heating my face.

Hot resentment flared and burned. I hated that he had this affect on me. No one else could make me feel so unsure of myself, so utterly gauche. Anakin was barely out of the figurative schoolroom, how dare he exhibit this kind of poise and control when I was rapidly reverting to a trembling mess!

"What are you doing here? It's the middle of the night. Is something wrong?" I finally thought to ask; scrabbling to make sense of his unannounced visit and the disturbing vibes he was sending out. My attention was caught by the movement of his hands as he drew something from behind his back. He was holding what I thought was his Jedi robe, the material a dark waterfall against the lighter color of his sleep pants. I dismissed the sight as inconsequential, more concerned as to why Anakin was not bothering to respond to my nervous question. It was not a good sign.

My eyes strayed back to his face, carefully searching his tense and guarded features. Perversely, I found myself desperately wishing he was there to tell me of some imminent danger instead of what I knew deep down he had come for. Threats to my life seemed so much less complicated than threats to my heart.

Death over dishonor, Padme? Don't be so foolish.

Remember who you are, my inner voice hissed. Senator Padme Naberrie Amidala will not be cowed by a Jedi Padawan. Drawing myself up in as regal a stance as I could manage, I coaxed a disdainful expression to my face. Looking down one's nose at a Jedi who is over a head taller is not an easy task, nevertheless I somehow managed it. Unfortunately my tone did not match my haughty demeanor.

"If you came to see if the storm was worrying me, you needn't have bothered." I said. A slight tremor warbled, belying the cool formality I had hoped to express. I gritted my teeth in self-disgust and tried to squash the increasing worry making me queasy.

Please, just leave. Don't push me any further.

Why did he just stand there? If he were wise he would take the opportunity I was giving him and bow out gracefully. I could have saved my breath. He took my proffered ready made excuse and swatted it aside like it was an irritating insect.

Anakin's eyes creased in a kind of derisive amusement and I immediately bristled with annoyance. "Oh, I didn't think the storm would frighten you, milady. I have a feeling you like the wildness, the unpredictability." He murmured the last word meaningfully, his humor melting away as he regarded me intently.

How was it possible to put so much innuendo into so simple a word? Milady. Anakin had taken to calling me that when he felt I was treating him like a child or when he . . .

"I think I rather like to hear you beg, milady."

My throat convulsed. This is not happening. But it was. And what was worse, my body was readily responding to the electricity we were sparking off of each other despite the frantic messages of warning my head was trying to impart. While desire and caution battled for supremacy, I remained fused to one spot. My indecision coupled with my crumbling resolve was my downfall.

Ever the impatient and impulsive boy, Anakin tired of waiting. Seeing I was not going to come any closer to him of my own accord, he took matters into his own hands and bridged the distance between us. His long legs brought his lean frame within centimeters of mine - all in the time it took for me to draw a single breath. I stepped back abruptly only to feel the door knobs

press hard into the small of my back - a mocking reminder that I had no where to go; that it was too late to escape what was coming.

Sullen eyes glowered down at me almost menacingly. His bold stare penetrated the dimness; part threat, part longing. The resulting indefinable emotion pulsed beneath my skin and caused my breath to come short.

"Tell me, who else have you worn this for?" Anakin drawled softly. My puzzled gaze fell to the fist full of black leather he brought up. I realized with a start that what I had supposed was his cloak was actually the evening dress I had left draped across the chair by the fire. He must have retrieved it when he had crossed the room to scare me senseless.

I fidgeted uneasily under the weight of his disapproving stare. All my misgivings at wearing such a revealing dress reared back up to jeer at me. I had worn a gown designed for seduction, at least the appearance of it, and with the one man I could not allow myself to give in to. A guilty flush stained my cheeks - and this time he was close enough to see it.

"Padme." Anakin barked, bringing me back to my present surroundings with a jerk.

My gaze bounced away from the supple leather being held like a denouncement before me and back to Anakin's face. Unspoken accusations and an underlying layer of hurt warred there.

"Who else have you worn this for?" Each word came out as brittle as chipped ice.

I did not see the reason behind the question until too late.

"I . . . wore it at a Senate reception I attended for the ambassador of Corellia." Bewildered confusion colored my reply as my penchant for telling the truth damned me. "And a banquet, a banquet I attended with . . ." My voice trailed off as it suddenly occurred to me why he was so interested in my social life.

"With who?" Anakin demanded with deceptive casualness. Beneath the conversational intonation lurked a fermenting unrest I did not fully understand. It was as if he had taken all his hurt and pain and pushed it down into a tight ball that was now threatening to explode at the slightest provocation. Something was telling me that to give away the identity of my escort would serve as the combustible to his volatile explosives.

"It - it doesn't matter." I said, subjugating the truth for once. He really did not want to know the answer to his intrusive question. "Anakin, I think you should go back to your room."

His mouth tightened at my evasiveness but he did not try to pursue any further the identity of my companion. Any relief I felt was short lived. It instantly became more than apparent he had other things on his mind and leaving was not one of them.

Anakin leaned slowly forward, his forearm coming to rest against the door just above my head, his fingers lightly threading through strands of my unbound hair. I could not move for the simple fact that the only thing holding me upright was the solid surface at my back and the burning blue eyes holding me prisoner. Anakin's face was so close his breath stroked my cheek and ruffled the wispy strands of hair framing my face.

"This is what you wear when you are so determined not to 'give into this'?" Acerbic bitterness

tinged his question and I winced. "Do you have any idea the affect you had on me in this?"

"I . . ." But what could I say when I had already berated myself for wearing an outfit that sent the exact opposite message from the words falling from my lips. "That was not my intent." I finally managed. Tomorrow, I decided, the damn dress was going to be thrown out.

Anakin snorted disbelievingly and then swiftly tossed the dress aside as if disgusted by the sight. I did not spare it a glance. I was entranced by the level of desperation and anger being exhibited. The rawness of his emotions was a stunning revelation. I knew in a shocking moment of clarity that I could doubt everything else, my role in the universe, my own feelings and instincts, what was right and wrong, but to doubt that Anakin wanted me with every fiber of his being was a fool's errand.

The very surety of my realization did not sweep away my deeply ingrained reservations. Instead it magnified all my fears and doubts. To be the object of someone's all consuming desire was absolutely terrifying - even if there was unvoiced reciprocation. Anakin was unique and dangerous in a way I could not quite put my finger on. There was something . . . off about him and I could not but help remembering Obi Wan's reluctance to take him on as a Padawan.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when Anakin's now free hand came up to cup the side of my face, his callused thumb first caressing the curve of my cheekbone before drifting to lightly trace the outline of my lips. I heard my name but knew it had never passed his lips. The incredible abilities the man before me possessed sent a renewed frisson of fear through me. He had an aura of danger about him that was at once repellant and alluring.

"Do you know how much I wanted to untie those laces?" Anakin's fingers traced a slow path along the length of my neck, coming to rest just above the place where my heart beat like a trapped bird. "To peel the dress away and feel the warmth of you against my hands?"

A clever trap baited with potent words. They went straight to my head like the intoxicating fumes from strong, sweet wine.

Anakin's voice dropped to just above a whisper. "Do you have any idea how much I wanted to taste you?"

Heavy lidded eyes, previously intent on watching his fingers explore the exposed skin at my neckline, lifted and bore into mine. A thousand glimmerflies took wing in the pit of my stomach as scorching heat unfurled deep inside me. My rock solid resolve to do the right thing was wavering under his smoky gaze. He was seducing me with his touch, his words, and the ravenous adoration that shone in his eyes. The transformation was complete, the boy I knew to the man I wanted.

My sensory perception went into hyperdrive. Every one of my senses honed in on a certain scent, sight, sound and touch. The hundreds of blue variations in his slumberous orbs stood out like burning beacons in the gloom. I could smell the cold panes of glass, the odor of old wood and paint, the scent of rain seeping in through some invisible chink, but most of all, I could smell the clean male scent of Anakin as his body heat radiated outwards and wrapped me in its seductive embrace.

"It was just the two of us." Anakin gently pried my unresisting arms away and slipped his warm hands inside my robe. They curved over my hips, stroking me with practiced skill as if he had done this a thousand times before. And I did nothing to stop him. I let him bewitch me; I let myself fall under the spell of the burning path of fire his touch left in its wake.

A warm lassitude was spreading through my limbs making them feel leaden and weak. Anakin encircled my waist possessively, hands canting my hips closer to him. "Only two of us and yet you wore a dress that was begging to be removed. Did you ever ask yourself why?"

"Anakin." I moaned warningly even as my senses zinged with the darts of desire lancing through me. His touch was forging new paths along the uncharted territory of my body. The decadent things he was doing, the wicked things he was saying; never in my life had I thought I could feel so many things at once.

//A taste of what's to come//

His words echoed in my head, pulling me from the trance.

No, it is not right . . . it is all wrong and on too many levels to count. I had to make him understand that before he stole the rest of my rational thoughts. One large hand skated up my ribcage and cupped my breast through my nightgown. A mewling whimper I could not control sounded in the back of my throat, bringing a gleam of triumph to eyes that studied my reactions with a riveted intensity. The scent of lust filled my nostrils and breathing suddenly became a chore my lungs refused to perform. I was drowning in a sea of new sensations. Some part of me tried to refuse the invitation to succumb but the effort was doomed to failure even as I tried to form the words to tell him so.

"Don't . . ." The rest of my sentence trailed away into nothing under the wilting influence of Anakin's mocking smile and the feel of his fingers dancing patterns lower and lower. He pressed himself against me and I inhaled sharply as his hard length made itself known more forcibly.

Lips brushed the shell of my ear, his hot breath caressed me. "Don't, Padme? Then why don't you stop me?"

Anakin's arrogant challenge hovered in the air. I struggled against the drugging tide of desire racking my body. Every passing wave dragged me further under its hypnotic influence. Memories from the picnic surged and fought their way to the surface. I had been so near to giving in, to breaking the rules that governed my life - rules that kept me safe and free of unwanted encumbrances and untidy emotional entanglements. Anakin was disturbingly close to making me forget everything again. I had to stop him, to stop this before it was too late. For when I had warned him our being together would destroy our lives, I had really meant I was afraid it would destroy mine.

The decision to act was instinctive. My hands came up to push at the smooth expanse of bare chest blocking me in. I shoved hard - prepared to take refuge in the nearby refresher once I gained my freedom - and achieved absolutely nothing. Anakin was immovable, a solid mountain of muscle and bone. A low chuckle that held no real amusement rumbled from my captor. His smooth skin vibrated ominously beneath my splayed hands.

"I don't think so. There won't be any running away this time." Anakin drawled. The smugness of his tone crawled under my skin. Too late I remembered his reaction to the way I had fled from

him after pushing him away in the meadow. Now the memory of the chase through the trees, the way he had hunted me down so relentlessly, was all I could think about. At the time my distress had been enough to break through his blind anger when he had inevitably caught me but I sensed there would be no such reprieve this time.

Any further attempts at protest on my part were doomed to abysmal failure. Anakin's face descended so rapidly I had no chance to react before his lips were roughly covering mine. The hungry kiss tore away at my already shaky defenses, dissolving them like wax in a flame. Desire burned bright, blinding me to everything but the arousal searing my senses.

Anakin's mouth was hot and sweet, his searching tongue skillfully and easily enticing my lips to part for his passionate invasion. There was no escaping the consuming fire. Anakin was the walking embodiment of temptation and I was more than susceptible. With a moan of defeat I kissed him back, meeting the persistent onslaught with a hunger of my own. But I still had enough presence of mind to use every last ounce of strength to keep him from crushing me to him.

Anakin felt my resistance and was not pleased. He reluctantly broke away, but drew the kiss out by sucking on my lower lip just a little longer before releasing me completely. An impatient growl caught in his throat and his resulting jagged breathing accompanied his fierce words and hard grasp.

"I know you, Padme. You don't think I do but you're wrong." His hold loosened slightly and he started inching backwards, taking me with him. The clutching of his fingers at my shoulders changed from punishing to gently encouraging as if he were gingerly cajoling a sleepwalker back to safety. "I've known you since the moment I saw you. Do you remember what I asked then?"

"Are you an angel?" A child's voice floated up through the mists of time.

"Yes, I remember." I whispered, lost in the disturbing mix of sweetness and unease the memory inspired. A heavy sensual fog clouded my head and I reluctantly let him lead me as his voice lured me on.

"You won me that day. I was blinded by you. Your beauty and strength of spirit, your sense of justice, and your honor - all of it made you different from anyone I'd ever known. But I know the secret you as well." I stared at him dumbly, not liking the way his words were so closely echoing my earlier thoughts; the ones I had entertained when I was alone and contemplating the wild Naboo night.

"It must be so hard . . . holding all of it inside, never letting your true self out." Anakin continued. His slow, steady voice and sympathetic words were like bacta on a burn, soothing and cool. Despite knowing better, I let him gently guide me away from the potential sanctuary of the refresher and towards the glowing embers of the dying fire - closer to the bed. "You don't always have to be the strong one, Padme."

The empathy, the understanding in his expression reached a part of me few were aware existed. It was like having your worst secret drawn out and not only accepted but forgiven. The promise of a haven was being dangled in front of me like priceless jewels before a courtesan.

We reached the foot of the bed but it barely registered on my conscious for I was lost in the

maelstrom emanating from the Jedi intent on my seduction. Everything Anakin was whispering to me was a promise wrapped in comfort. I was so tired of fighting this hold he held over me and in my weariness I started to believe in what he was saying.

I wanted to believe.

I needed to believe.

"It could be us against them. All you have to do is let me in." He said, continuing to weave his enticing spell, offering his help in lifting the weight from my shoulders that seemed more and more an intolerable burden. The low cadence of his voice was mesmerizing.

But as he pulled me towards him, my internal warning system sounded loudly in my mind. Stop him, stop him now! Just a few minutes my heart sang in response. Yes, a few minutes and then I will think again of my responsibilities and reputation; just a little while longer then I will remember why exactly I am not supposed to allow this familiarity. Surely by then the reasons why this is wrong will come back to me and I will be able to call a halt to it all.

Fool.

The sound of my pounding heart was overridden by the loudest roll of thunder so far. The tattered edges of my composure crumbled and I jumped; my involuntary jerk so violent I almost pulled free of Anakin's restraining hold. Immediately his fingers tightened, his grip moving from merely restraining to one bordering on the edge of pain.

Perhaps he thought I was trying to escape again. His beguiling ways instantly vanished and with an abruptness that left me stunned, Anakin bore me backwards, pushing me against one of the thick posts at the foot of the massive bed. The carved edges dug uncomfortably into my flesh through the thin protection of my gown and robe. A dark thrill, twisted and bent, curled and writhed inside me. Anakin pressed closer and a sweeping sense of the inevitability of it all hit me hard.

"It wouldn't be like it was with the others, Padme." His voice was rich and heavy with its drowsy sensuality.

Others? The small niggling seed of confusion brought a furrow to my brow but before it could take firm hold, Anakin's hands were back at my shoulders and the thought slipped away along with the marginal protection of my robe. The heavy velvet slithered down my body, making a soft swishing noise as it flowed against the silk of my nightgown, before finally settling at my feet in an expensive puddle of blue. The cool air kissing the newly exposed bare skin jarred me from my muddled thoughts. But when I belatedly tried to move to the side, to escape his overpowering closeness, Anakin merely stayed me by sliding his hands around my waist, his hold an unbreakable chain.

A low groan escaped from us both as Anakin nuzzled his roughened face against mine, his spicy scent teasing my senses. The slight abrasiveness of his skin rasped against my ear and cheek. His hands were everywhere at once, his touch scorching me through material that offered little to hinder his roaming caresses. My breath came in harsh little pants, the growing excitement my body insisted on listening to frightened me with its power.

One of my hands was grabbed and dragged down to the bulge straining against the front of his pants. Anakin guided my hand to stroke him, ignoring my attempts to wrench away. At the feel of him, so rigid and hard, so utterly male and unfamiliar, I stilled - a flood of embarrassment and shock knifing through me. Everything was moving too fast and my panic and innate shyness welled up like a bubbling fountain.

Anakin lifted his head from where he had been kissing my neck. His annoyance at my reluctance showed in his rather petulant expression. I bit back the urge to apologize when I had no idea why he was so disturbed. Unlike the other day, he was treating me as if all this were commonplace to me.

"You can stop pretending, Padme. You know what to do, what a man likes." He crashed through my thoughts with all the subtlety of a rampaging shaak. Sparking blue eyes held me in a kind of horrified immobility, his misguided beliefs wounding me far more than I normally would have allowed. But without my usual defenses I was vulnerable to his slings and arrows. "I can't say that it doesn't bother me but you're here with me now. And this time it isn't about alliances or treaties, this is about us."

"You really don't like politicians, do you?"

It had been a teasing comment then but now it was apparent that he thought . . . Several Naboo curse words tripped to the end of my tongue as vitriolic recriminations filled my head. How dare he think such things of me! The arrogant, stuck up, smart-mouthed child! And I had been on the brink of giving in, to throwing my morals and beliefs to the wind under the influence of his charm and honeyed words. Was all this just a way to get into my bed? A bed he obviously thought had been shared before. And what if it had, my mind sputtered. None of his actions came close to hinting at inexperience on his part. An unexpected wave of jealousy pierced my heart.

Others! I seethed inwardly. Indignant anger and unexpected hurt continued to color my thoughts. No more. I was through with whatever wicked game Anakin was playing. I did not know where he had learned to play it, nor did I understand the rules but I decided I was going to bring it to a halt. I wanted everything the way it used to be - normal and placid, with no one constantly hammering away at my defenses and working to stir up exhausting foreign emotions to confuse and disturb me. And my first reactive step was getting the insulting, insinuating Jedi out of my room.

My heel came down hard on top of Anakin's bare foot. The damage was minimal but it gave me the element of surprise and using a defensive technique remembered from a session with Captain Typho, I twisted my hand free in a sly maneuver. Normally I did not care for violence but I shoved those reservations aside, balled up my fist and hit Anakin as hard as I could across the jaw. Or at least I tried to.

With his eerie ability to second guess my movements, Anakin jerked his head back just in time to avoid the full impact of the blow. There was a harshly growled curse and the next thing I knew I was being picked up none too gently and roughly tossed onto the mattress.

"Truth hurts, does it?" He practically snarled as I flew through space.

Everything happened so fast. One minute I was on my stomach, starting a quick crawl towards the nearest edge, the next Anakin had grabbed my ankles and flipped me onto my back. One

hard yank and my body slid back down to the foot of the bed, the hem of my night gown rucking up around my hips to leave my legs completely bare. The sight held his fascinated gaze far too long and I squirmed and kicked out, trying to get away.

Anakin's hands closed around my thighs. Flesh slid against flesh as they moved higher. The mattress depressed beneath his weight as he hefted himself up, knees strategically placed either side of my legs, effectively trapping me. By the time I had the presence of mind to try and stop his ascent; Anakin was on top of me. The weight of his body pinning me down was like a heated blanket, simultaneously oppressive and comforting. Once again I felt the frightening proof of his need pressing against me, ridged and thick, separated now by just his thin sleep pants.

A surge of adrenaline lent me some strength but soon my flailing fists were subdued and I was staring into the infuriatingly amused face of Anakin. My incoherent sputters of rage were cut off when his mouth once again closed over mine. This time his lips were bruising as he sought to dominate me with his superior strength. The weight of him crushed me to the mattress, stealing any breath I had left from his brutal but arousing kisses.

Struggling proved exhausting with the hold he had on me. He had me trapped and he knew it. Even the heavy bedclothes pillowing my head were used to his advantage. If I tried to turn my head away from his punishing lips I was met with a wall of thick linen that threatened my air supply.

I was growing dizzy when he finally relented. Anakin moved from my swollen lips to trail the line of my jaw and then the slope of my neck. Between my desperate gasps for air, I heard his disjointed whisper brush against my flesh.

"I'll make you forget anyone who came before me, Padme. You were meant for me, I'll prove it to you."

The swirling strokes of the painted orange and yellow sunrise, faded but still vibrant, stared down at me from the ceiling. A languorous tide of arousal was rolling through me, gentle at first then with increasing strength. Anakin's teeth nipped at the skin just above the rapid pulse beating at the base of my throat and my neck bowed sharply. Reason was rapidly dissolving. I was simply reacting now to the delicious things being done to me.

Would it be so bad to give in this once? Do you have a choice, a darker voice asked tauntingly.

Somehow my hands, released from Anakin's restraining hold, found their way to clutch the back of his head, though I had no memory of them doing so. Giving into temptation, I threaded my fingers through the spiky softness of his hair, urging him closer, silently asking for more - more of everything.

It was all so very wrong and in the morning I would regret giving into my body's demands but right then I no longer had the energy or will to care.

Anakin's clever, nimble fingers were plucking at the silk ribbons holding the front of my gown together. Every time one was freed from its loose bow, his tongue snaked out to christen the newly revealed flesh and an appreciative sound would rumble in the back of his throat. The warm, wet rasp of his tongue nearly drove me insane with want. He was taking his time, drawing out the moment, torturing me with the anticipation of his next unknown move.

When the last ribbon was released, he reverently parted the material to reveal my naked breasts and flat abdomen to his smoldering eyes. Anakin pulled back, his gaze roving slowly over every dip and curve laid out before him.

"Beautiful." He breathed. Warm finger tips began a slow exploration, the feather light touch sending a low current of electricity jolting along my already overly sensitized nerve endings. Anakin was looking at me as if I was a priceless piece of art and he was an experienced connoisseur. More than uneasy with the raw need reflected in his expression, I dropped my hands from where they had come to rest on his broad shoulders and fumbled with the edges of my gown, shyly trying to pull them back together.

"No." Anakin stopped me before I could cover myself back up. His hands gently but firmly forced mine back to their original position at his shoulders. A crooked half smile, similar to the one that had graced his face when he had first kissed me, slowly appeared.

My face was aglow with the novelty of being partially nude in front of a man but Anakin put it down to a different reason altogether. A cloud passed over his face and then his smile turned to a hatefully snide smirk.

A finger ran down my heated cheek. "Very pretty. Do you put on a similar act with all your lovers?" He asked. The jealousy lacing his nasty remark made me flinch but I was not about to let him get away with it.

"Are you as insulting with all of yours?" I shot back.

Anakin glared down at me, his lips compressed into a tight line of annoyance at being called out for the same behavior he was accusing me of indulging in. A dark light shifted behind his eyes and my head fell back against the mattress in tired defeat. I could not keep up with his mercurial mood swings much longer.

"Always the quick wit, milady." He murmured throatily and then he lowered his head and licked a path from my navel to my breast in one long sweep.

"So sweet. So mine." He said. The possessive way he spoke the last word sent a shivery chill through me.

"Destroy our lives . . . destroy our lives . . . destroy our lives . . ."

"Anakin." I started, only to gasp as he nibbled sharply at the underside of one breast. My fingernails dug into the flesh of his shoulders and a muffled grunt reached my ears. When his lips closed around one hardened bud all coherent thoughts, every word I had ever learned, ceased to exist. Hot and cold tingles raced through me, dispelling everything; the slurs on my character, the aspirations cast on my morals, the mired of reasons why this should not be happening - everything. The only thing that mattered was the feel of Anakin's mouth at my breasts, licking and sucking each in turn with such primitive lust it would have frightened me had my mind been close to working properly.

A dull, throbbing ache started up between my legs, intensifying with every tug of his hot mouth on my flesh, with every kneading caress of his hands. The lightning outside was nothing compared to the bolts rocking me internally. Inarticulate noises formed in my throat and mingled

with the harsher groans coming from Anakin.

Fragments of sensations shot through my awareness in a haphazard whirl. Skin dewy with the gloss of exertion slid together in perfect synchronization. Anakin's clean scent surrounded me; it was in my nose and his taste was in my mouth. Light stubble grated against the tender skin of my breasts. Muscles flexed and bunched beneath my exploring fingers.

I began to feel like Padme had never been. All that existed was Anakin and the way he was loving me, worshipping my body with his hands and mouth. There was nothing else and there never would be again.

With no warning, a jolt of exquisite pain lanced through my body. The loud cry dragged from me tapered off to a choked gasp. Anakin lifted his head, his eyes heavy with arousal and arrogant male satisfaction. He studied my face for a long moment suspended in time, carefully watching every nuance of expression that crossed my features.

My breathing was choppy and ragged as I struggled to make sense of what had just happened.

"Did that hurt?" Anakin asked me in a voice as thick as honey.

Words refused to come so I nodded, staring back at him with a growing sense of . . . anticipation? Fear? A disturbing mix of both? I closed my eyes and tried to gather the shattered remnants of my already fractured composure back together. I felt rather than saw him lower his head once more.

I had just begun to relax as his tongue soothed the area just savaged when he repeated the act and my entire body tried to arc off the bed. This time I screamed as the fiery pleasure-pain slammed into every nerve ending I possessed. Colors of all hues danced in front of my eyes and I forgot how to breathe. I forgot how to think and reason. Then Anakin was there, just as he always was, his face hovering right above mine.

A shadow flitted behind the bright blue of his eyes.

"It hurt but you liked it, didn't you?" I swallowed the lump in my throat and concentrated on breathing in and out. There was nothing more that I wanted than to be able to look away from his hypnotic gaze but I could not tear my eyes from his. Nor could I deny what he knew to be true.

Anakin's lips brushed mine. "Should I do it again?"

A trickle of wet heat wended its way from my body. Desire thrummed in my veins, spilling like liquid fire. I exhaled a pent up breath in resignation and my eyelids fluttered shut under the weight of my imminent surrender.

"Yes." I sighed and yielded to the inevitable.

Chapter 4: Danger Coming - Part 3

Later, much later, there was the sensation of being lifted and moved further up onto the soft bed

by strong arms and gentle hands; of being divested of my crumpled nightgown, of being settled back into the plush linens while soothing caresses and whispered words I did not understand lulled me into an abnormal calm.

The rapid drumbeat of my heart and my shallow breathing began to steady as I kept my eyes shut in an effort to regain my equilibrium. Trying to assimilate all that had transpired since Anakin had ridden into my room on the back of the storm was a dizzying task. Pushed and prodded, dragged and cajoled, led and lured until I no longer knew what I wanted or what was right. He had a way about him I had never encountered in another person before, a strength of will that surpassed even my own - especially when he was after something he wanted badly enough.

I was stunned by what Anakin had done; stunned at my response to something I never in my life imagined. The undeniable pleasure my body had taken frightened and confused me. I was not used to letting the desires of the flesh rule my head and that unnatural state of affairs was leaving me grasping for any kind of reality I could wrap my mind around.

"Lea'l nu mi'l." Anakin crooned against my breasts, the ends of his spiky blonde hair brushing softly against my hypersensitive flesh. "Ke'ah tu, shay nil tol'el."

A hereto forgotten memory working its way to the surface brought my eyes flying open. Quiet, lilting words filtered through my mind. Strange words from a time long past. A careworn woman with brown hair twisted into an odd side bun, dressed in the drab clothing of a slave, speaking to a tow headed boy in the shadows of a room which, while clean and orderly, had seen better days once upon a time.

I do not know where the memory came from for I had never recalled it before. My time on Tatooine had been brief and stressful, fraught with worry, fear, and anger at what was happening on my home world. And then there had been the annoyance at a Jedi Master who did not treat me as a queen because out of necessity I had chosen to hide my identity. As a lowly handmaiden my input had been ignored and I had been made to feel useless and, even worse, helpless. The horrific events that followed our escape from the desert world had only served to bury the memory deeper.

Now the layers of time peeled away and in my mind's eye I once more stood on the far side of the hovel half listening to the foreign words spoken between mother and son. I doubted the words he was murmuring as he kissed his way from my now tender breasts down the slope of my abdomen were as innocent as those clearly had been.

"Tey nu fera ki na." Each word was interspaced with succulent kisses and whispered in a tone of voice that made me quiver within. "Padme, shay tee'na kai lee."

Long fingers stroked my flesh, skimming my sides and gliding over the swell of my hips. The delicate caresses and the criminal way Anakin was using his tongue to circle and dip in and out of my navel was a sensual combination that worked its magic on me all too well. Every touch sent my pulse skittering and robbed me of life sustaining breath. Each place where his flesh contacted with mine opened new worlds of sensation, destroying the one dimensional view of the universe I had previously held. New vistas were opening to me and I worried that I would never want those feelings to stop.

"Anakin!"

The sudden needy cry wrung from me turned into one of scandalized protest. Anakin's mouth had moved lower, kissing the soft hollow where thigh met pelvis and then, shockingly, he pressed his lips to my most intimate part.

I tried to sit up but a hard hand pressed itself against my abdomen, splaying flat to keep me on my back. Likewise his other hand tightened its restraining hold on one bent leg, his fingers digging into my thigh. I could only watch in horrified embarrassment as he drew back slightly to regard me with a puzzled look. I knew what he was thinking before he even said anything. The experienced woman he thought me to be was surely well versed in this particular act.

His tone was smug when he found his voice. "You must've had very uninteresting . . . experiences before." He rubbed his stubble roughened cheek against the soft skin of my inner thigh while holding me mesmerized with his smoky gaze. "I can change that - make you feel things you've never felt. Just relax, ti nu ele'."

Our eyes dueled - mine filled with panicked uncertainty and his filled with a ferocious determination that told me he was intent on expunging the memory of all those phantom lovers he insisted on tormenting himself with. The memory of his unflattering assessment of my private life came trickling back into my awareness and his hold on me began to unravel.

Gods, this should not be. Anakin should not be in my bed. I should not be allowing these unprecedented liberties. But such realizations were for naught. As with all my reactions that night, it was too little, too late. In the next few seconds my renewed concerns were torn asunder when Anakin bent his head and his hot breath tickled along my exposed flesh. A frenzy of nips and kisses followed and I squirmed against the bedclothes. A craving was welling up inside of me but it proved maddeningly elusive; like something beautiful dangling just out of my increasingly desperate reach. When his tongue finally found me again I almost sobbed with relief. Then all thoughts fractured into a million different pieces and I was carried to a world of incredible heights where words did not matter.

Long, slow licks were followed by a hot mouth sucking, teeth scraping and tongue flicking away at the hard nub. Anakin was savoring me like he would his favorite desert. Embarrassment and self-consciousness receded as years of propriety and decorum fell to the superior power of desire.

Strong arms hooked themselves around my legs and pulled me even closer to his ravaging mouth. Curling tendrils stuck to my damp cheek and brow as I rocked my head back and forth. My world was crumbling and all I could do was moan and whimper, sometimes in Basic but more and more I lapsed into my native tongue.

Anakin's own disjointed phrases still made their way to my ears. Sometimes they were muffled yet more often than not they would also reverberate in my head as clear as day.

//Sha'tay ti met . . . mor nu fen'l kah//

He was forcing me to the edge of the unknown and I thrashed against the weight of his determined hand holding me down. The mounting pressure building inside was overwhelming every part of me. Too-fast breathing, shallow and harsh, forced its way past my clenched jaw, my nostrils flaring. Any miniscule thoughts of resistance had long since folded under the powerful tides of pleasure he was creating.

The panting of his name thrummed a beat in time with the invasion of his tongue. My hands groped at the sheets, clawing at the fabric, fisting the material in a white knuckled grip. I had to find purchase to keep myself from flying from my body; from losing myself entirely.

A fountain of inarticulate noises bubbled up from my throat as the dam within broke wide open. My head craned back against the mattress. Every muscle in my body tensed so sharply I could not help but cry out. Heavy pulses of sweet release swept over me, crashing through my mind and body like a fierce and destructive tidal wave. His name was on my lips as I careened back into a body drained and heavy with sensual lassitude.

Between my parted legs, Anakin continued to lap at the wet heat dampening the juncture of my thighs. The grunts and liquid sounds crawled in my head and made me want to be hurled over the edge again and again.

I collapsed back against the bed, the damp linens clinging to my glistening body. In a state of euphoria, breathless and dazed, I stared at the painted glow of the Naboo sunrise beaming down at me from the plastered ceiling. The artificial sun seemed out of place, a benevolent presence in my chaotic, topsy-turvy world.

I was not sure how much more I could take. This process of being torn apart, of having everything I thought I knew ripped from my desperate grasp and shredded before my very eyes was exhausting . . . and, gods help me, disturbingly exciting. Anakin was taking me to places I never dreamed existed. It was heady and intoxicating like bubbles in champagne but always in the back of my ever rational mind was the knowledge that this could not last past this one night. What I had said earlier that evening was still true. To live a lie would destroy us both.

A thousand such thoughts raced through my whirling mind. Perhaps Anakin sensed them with his uncanny powers or perhaps it was just instinct but I was not allowed to dwell further on such negative practicalities. With a last intimate kiss, he slowly began to retrace the route he had taken earlier, dragging his lips over my skin, using his skillful mouth to partake of every centimeter he could as he moved up my flushed body.

Then the warmth disappeared as Anakin suddenly rose to his knees to tower over me once more. His fierce gaze was intense, the lines of his face stark with lust and the desire to possess as he loosened the drawstring of his pants. The slow, calculated movements, the way his eyes bore into mine with such raw need, made my stomach flip and roll. I was not sure if it was with excitement or arousal tinged heavily with fear. All I was sure of was being held spellbound by the dark fire in his eyes and the smooth, hard lines of his graceful body glowing golden in the dim light.

He thinks you have done this before, my mind cried in warning. But it was too late. Anakin murmured my name with a hungry growl before lowering himself on top of me. The weight of his body pressed me down into the giving mattress, his mouth greedily fastened over the delicate skin at the hollow of my throat. Twining my fingers through hair coarsened by ten years of missions in harsh climes, I pulled him closer, encouraging him to ravage my neck; asking without words for the feel of his teeth and tongue against my flesh once more.

Anakin's length was heavy and hard against my thigh. He pressed himself insistently at my entrance, searching for where he most wanted to be. I gasped, arching my body as my legs automatically tightened around the lean hips grinding against mine. Every feeling known to

mankind coursed through me like molten fire as the ache to be taken increased with each passing second.

My eyelids sank beneath the barrage of sensations; beneath the compulsive hunger that Anakin's ministrations were creating within me. Control was gone. Reason was gone. In there place was want and desire and nothing else.

"Padme, no!"

The command was harsh and compelling and my eyes flew open to find Anakin staring down at me with a tightly drawn mouth and hard eyes. "Don't close your eyes. I want you to know exactly who's inside you - that it's me giving you this pleasure and no one else."

The pain and jealousy behind the words gripped my heart, its devilish fingers tightening around the beating organ like a noose around my neck. I tried to tell him then but he was too far gone to listen. Any chance to disabuse him of his error was lost.

Besides, he would not have believed me anyway, I thought with a kind of bitter regret, and then all conscious thought ceased as the look in his eyes pulled me into a new realm of spiraling desire, dragging me down without pity or remorse.

Chapter 5: Defenses Overwhelmed

***"When the gods wish to punish us,
they answer our prayers."***

Oscar Wilde

They say the road leading to the seven levels of hell is paved with good intentions.

Striding down the deserted hallway towards Padme's room, I told myself my only intention was to talk, to make her acknowledge that the existence of our feelings couldn't be ignored and dismissed so lightly. The cringe inducing romantic drivel I'd spouted earlier hadn't made any impact so this time it would be plain words couched without the bad poetry and, more importantly, without the gentlemanly retreat.

The colorful tapestries hugging the smooth walls of the hallway were but blurred scenery to me; I could've been stalking along a sewer corridor for all the attention I paid my surroundings. All I could see before me was Padme, her brow lifted mockingly at me in the afternoon sunshine, and I longed for that simple time when the story of her first kiss with Palo was the worst of my hurts. Beneath my skin jealousy flared anew, sharp and angry, it burned along with the force of the storm battering the walls of the retreat.

Oh yes, we would talk about a great many things.

I paused at the wooden door serving to bar me from my goal; half hoping it would be locked so I could safely vent some of my frustration on an inanimate object before facing the maddeningly stony faade of the girl so bent on throwing away our future together. But the old knob, worn smooth by thousands of hands before mine, turned easily and I swore under my breath as I was

cheated out of a much needed release.

The heavy door swung slowly inward, the slight creak of the hinges thankfully lost beneath the steady howl of the wind; the storm proving to be my unexpected ally. For a long moment I just stood at the threshold and took in the dimly lit room. The first thing my eyes focused on was the large four poster bed with its rumpled linens thrown back in a disordered heap. Empty. No dark haired girl was resting her head on the pillow; no slender figure with sleep warmed curves lay within its embrace.

A wisp of spiteful satisfaction curled in my chest at the rewarding sight. So, the wrecker of my dreams wasn't resting easy while I suffered and stewed in the misery of rejection. Good, I couldn't help but think with an unflattering trace of malice. Why should Padme sleep the sleep of the guiltless while I remained wide awake and aching with this unbearable need? Why should she escape the consequences of this unnecessary torment she insisted on perpetuating?

My eyes abandoned the empty bed, impatiently sweeping the interior, hungrily searching for the object of my desire; for the keeper of my soul. The tightness in my chest increased tenfold when at last I found her. One would have thought it days and not hours since I'd seen her last the way the breath stuck in my throat and my pulse rate soared unaccountably.

Padme stood with her back to me, completely oblivious to my presence, the tempest raging outside holding her undivided attention. Determined to take advantage of her distraction, I started confidently forward only to stop in my tracks as I spied something draped casually over one of the fireside chairs. The scowl marring my face intensified instantly and my animosity jumped to the next level.

The black gown cascaded over the back of the chair, a siren song of discarded seduction. Who else has she worn that almost indecent dress for? The ugly voice chided me. The sight of leather and lace was all it took to make me forget my original purpose in seeking Padme out. Before I realized what I was about I had the offending garment in my hands, the slick material of the bodice bunching as I twisted it in a vicious grip. Who wore something like this when they were determined to keep a love struck man at arms length? A jab of disillusionment struck my heart as I tried to come to grips with the woman Padme had become. The paragon from my memory now seemed little better than a Coruscant tease - or worse.

The loud bang-crash of the balcony doors as they blew open under the onslaught of the elements covered the rest of my journey across the room. I followed Padme's struggle to push the doors closed without an ounce of remorse for my lack of chivalry. With a dispassionate gaze that belied my agitation, I took in the whip of her robe billowing out behind her, the slew of tiny petals swirling to catch at her wildly tousled hair, and the difficulty she had securing the doors, and waited for her to turn around.

Strong hands sliding down her feminine curves. Lips trailing along the curve of her neck. Another bringing out cries of ecstasy from between her parted lips.

Try as I might I couldn't stop the hateful images of Padme with another man from playing in my head like my own private holovid from hell. Sullen resentment beat in my chest, clouding my thinking with its dangerous poison. Jealousy was hardly an unfamiliar emotion to me - I'd lost count of the number of times I'd swallowed my bitterness as less skilled Padawan's received glowing praise while my own efforts were barely remarked upon - but such feelings were insignificant next to the ghosts of her lovers past. The slights, every pompous snub suffered at

the hands of my Jedi brethren, paled in comparison to these new and elusive specters I couldn't see to fight.

Then make her forget. Erase those memories and take her, teach her what you've always known - she's yours and always has been. The insinuating voice dripped with carnal hunger, playing like a soundtrack for the disturbing mental pictures continuing to whip through my mind.

Padme.

I'd never had something that was solely mine in my entire life. Slaves owned nothing; the clothes on their back, their shelter, the very food they ate, all were their master's property, and the Jedi Order forbade personal possessions - from Padawan to Master. I didn't have one tangible thing to remember my mother by except for childhood memories that grew more and more blurred around the edges with each passing year. Padme was to have been the one thing I could truly call mine. And now even that was tainted.

My conscience mocked me for the double standard of my thoughts. The rational part of me knew I was being grossly unfair, that my own past wouldn't stand up under such scrutiny, but being rational wasn't something I was good at when it came to Padme. I was ruled by my passions and I'd learned to accept that about myself, despite, or maybe because of, Obi Wan's constant remonstrations. It was this stronger part of me that was responsible for ferociously holding onto the dream of Padme at all cost, and as outdated as the view was, as illogical, it was mine.

An all powerful hunger rose up like a beast abruptly awakened and my throat constricted so tightly I couldn't seem to draw in enough life sustaining breath. The deeply rooted instinct to claim what was mine thrummed through me with such strength I knew it couldn't be ignored if I were to stay sane. Padme belonged to no one else and I would do whatever it took to wipe out every memory she had that didn't center around me.

The gratifying shock on Padme's face when she finally turned and saw me standing in the shadows was almost worth the trip alone. Her eyes went as big as saucers and for just a second a flicker of real fear lurked there as she hastily backed up and her face blanched white. Even when recognition flooded her face, I could feel the nervousness and increasing unease rolling off of her in thick, smothering waves. I didn't need the Force to know I'd knocked her completely off balance.

It was still a novelty to see Padme's composure so shattered. Like that day in the woods, gone was the in control senator who had stubbornly held fast to the moral high ground; in her place was someone all together different, a vulnerable girl ripe for the plucking. White hot arousal spiked through me and I hardened painfully. The base of power had shifted in my favor and though the guise of seducer was one I'd never found necessary to don before - after all, there was no need to seduce the willing - I was growing more and more comfortable with it. The role Padme unwittingly cast me in was fast becoming something to savor, the power decadent and exhilarating.

Pressing the advantage, I soon had her pinned against the door at her back, throwing one verbal punch at a time to further disconcert her. When I finally took possession of her mouth, she didn't know whether she was coming or going and the dark voice governing my thoughts ceased its taunting in favor of enjoying the sweet flesh beneath my hands.

From there it was almost too easy to maneuver her towards the cold bed she'd abandoned earlier. Silky smooth words of understanding carried her forward, unspoken seductive promises kept her from pulling away. I had caught her at the most opportune time and her defenses refused to rally for more than a few seconds at a time. Padme could deny what she felt all she wanted but her body didn't know how to lie. And I set out to prove it to her.

It was her manufactured demure demeanor; the blush dusting her cheeks as if this was all new to her, as if she'd never been bedded before that provoked me. It hurt, gods how it hurt, that Padme had made no attempt to deny she was familiar with bedroom politics. With little other choice, I took her lack of protest as the final evidence in the mental trial I'd been conducting every since I'd breathed in the lingering remnants of her fragrance in the stillness of my bedroom.

Tried and convicted; innocent no longer.

The affected virginal coyness, something she no longer had a right to, loosened something ugly deep inside my heart. Blushing was for the virtuous. My smile froze in place before twisting into one full of sour disillusionment. The instinct to lash out was all powerful and I couldn't stop the words from flowing like verbal poison.

"I can't say that it doesn't bother me but you're here with me now. And this time it isn't about alliances or treaties, this is about us." I said softly, unsuccessfully trying to hide my jealousy and pain beneath layers of condescending insolence. It was the same tone of voice which got me into so much trouble with the stuffy Temple instructors. It didn't go over well with Padme either.

In a flash the grudging look of trust I'd worked so hard to establish disappeared from Padme's face to be replaced by an expression that gave even me pause. The softness vanished, her mouth thinned out in furious indignation and an angry glint replaced the drowsy sensuality shining in her eyes just seconds before. Suddenly I was seeing the face that had defied the entire Trade Federation and dared to publicly chastise the Senate for its bureaucratic abandonment of her home world. It was the hated politician's mask; the one that chose duty over love.

My own temper spiraled swiftly upwards. I'd only spoken the truth, hadn't I? What right did she have to act the wounded party? No, I decided with an inward sneer, her reaction was just another of those games she was so adept at; the games which left me with an aching groin and my heart in tiny broken pieces.

Further thoughts came to a skidding halt when the heel of Padme's foot abruptly came down hard on top of mine in a vengeful reprisal, and a spasm of pain shot up my leg. Only the fact she was barefoot saved me from the possibility of walking with a limp for the rest of my life. I bit back the grunt of pain, but lost my hold on one of her hands when she wrenched it free in a self-defense move I recognized all too well. A technique gleaned from Panaka or Typho? I wondered automatically.

Distracted by both the idle thought and the suddenness of the attack, I barely had enough time to jerk back and escape having my head taken off by small but lethal flying fist. I managed to avoid the worse of the blow but in the process my thin thread of control snapped.

Damn it! That was it!

I'd tried telling her with heartfelt words how I felt about her, how I'd always felt about her, and all I'd gotten was crushed beneath the weight of her misguided sense of duty. I'd tried soft words of seduction and gentle wooing to convince her that what was between us couldn't be shunted aside so easily, and all I had to show for that was a throbbing foot and a tender jaw.

Renewed bleakness dripped from my heart, the darkness folding itself into the black mix that was my thunderous mood. Obi Wan's disapproving visage materialized as it often did when I was about to go against the Jedi code of gentlemanly behavior, but I shoved him back into the murky corners shadowing my mind. None of my Master's lectures had ever addressed the topic of how to deal with a stubborn Naboo shrew and once more I found I had to improvise.

Talking and ineffectual words were for fools and politicians, I decided. Maybe she only understood actions; she'd certainly seemed to that day in the meadow. I was bone tired of all the useless debating and having to kowtow to polite behavior - it was time to show her what her mind still refused to acknowledge and what mine had known for a frustrating amount of time.

I tested my sore jaw and for my efforts was rewarded with a painful twinge. Sith! That really hurt! So, she wanted to play rough? I ground out a vulgar oath that would have gotten me in great trouble back on Coruscant and then I picked up the spitting little cat and threw her on the bed with a flourish. Her outraged squeal was extremely satisfying to my ears and I couldn't help but let the smug taunt slip out. "Truth hurts, does it?"

She could lie to herself all she wanted but I'd reached the end of my tether. I was through with her games. I was through waiting for that longed for voluntary admission of love. And most of all, I was through suffering the incessant state of unendurable tension plaguing my soul.

A balcony drenched in afternoon sunlight. A kiss given and then snatched away, a dream crushed.

Twisted and bent maybe, but not destroyed. Like a mythical beast from a legend of old, the dream rose from the ashes of its funeral pyre and roared back to life. The word 'destiny' whispered to me. She's yours, promised the dark voice, didn't the Force tell you so years ago? Both my heart and my head cried yes!

Civility was a concept my mind no longer recognized and without further thought for anything save the immediate moment, I grabbed Padme's ankles and flipped her over before jerking her back down towards the foot of the bed. There would be no escape this time. A heavy fug of lust descended over me, fueled by jealous anger and the ancient primordial need to subdue and dominate; to take and have.

Make . . . her . . . forget . . .

The chant in my head was my mantra, the words beating in tandem with my pounding heart. Mine, I silently vowed. And before I was through she'd know it. In fact, before I was through with her, Padme would be lucky to remember her own name let alone the names of the ones that came before me.

Take . . . her . . .

The dark hunger demanded to be assuaged and I told myself I had no choice other than to

obey.

Chapter 6: Surrender

The hoarse cry of my name still rang in my ears like the sweetest of music as I slowly made my way back up Padme's quivering form, muttering against her warm flesh all the wicked things I wanted to do to her in a language she didn't understand. A great swell of pride puffed my chest and I considered smugly how I'd made her thrash and moan with my tongue; how her body had risen to my mouth with each shattering wave I'd wrung from her. I was confident I'd already succeeded in driving away the threatening apparitions of past loves and we had yet to get to the main course.

Padme's body gleamed like rich cream in the golden light cast by the dying fire, a sumptuous banquet laid out before me for my enjoyment. With lips still coated in the essence I'd coaxed from her, I kissed my way upwards, leaving the juncture of her thighs, moving over her flat belly, and then up the slope of one breast. I lingered a moment, enjoying the soft keening noises she was making, taking my time to trace both rosy peaks with the tip of my tongue. Everywhere my lips and hands touched, I imagined I was wiping out the ghost traces of another lover's touch. Here and here and yes, there and there.

It took all my will power but somehow I managed to ignore the insatiable need clamoring for me to continue exploring every centimeter of inviting flesh. The need to be inside her was threatening to push every other consideration aside as easily as a bantha through a crowd.

The warm musky scent of her release mingled enticingly with the delicate perfume she wore, and the combined fragrance wafted around me, an arousing aphrodisiac driving my own desire to a fever pitch. I'd never wanted anyone like I wanted Padme. The desire to be buried inside her was an overwhelming craving and I had to tamp down hard on the animalistic urge to forget all else and just plunge into her body and lose myself in the promised oblivion.

You have to make her forget. The persuasive voice rasped again, unrelenting in its effort to remind me of my purpose.

Melting brown eyes, glassy with sated arousal, followed me as I rose unsteadily to my knees and began to rid myself of my confining sleep pants. I kept my movements slow and deliberate; wanting to savor the moment, to draw it out so every detail would be burned into my memory - into her memory - like a lightsaber leaves its mark on metal. I would need that mental talisman to keep me going in the days ahead. For as much as I wanted it to be, physically making Padme mine wasn't the culmination of my dreams, and a seduction wasn't the same as a commitment. I knew no matter what transpired between us, I would still have a battle of wills on my hands before I could claim her as mine in every sense of the word.

Having Padme, learning the ways of her body, the sounds she made when she lost herself to passion, wasn't the zenith of my hopes . . . but it was damn close; close enough for the time being anyway. Besides even Jedi have limits to their control.

And I had just reached mine.

A low, throaty growl vibrated from deep within me, escaping from the same niche in my heart

where the memory of Padme had burned for the past ten years. Something completely male, an ancient drive calling from a past that still resided in every man, howled triumphantly in my head.

Padme's breath caught in her throat under the blaze of lust flaring in my eyes and her hands started to flutter up as if to ward me off. The skin of my face stretched taut, thin as paper over bone and tissue, all sharp angles and hard planes. A crashing wave of uncontrollable hunger crested and broke, sending fire singing through me and I had to grind my teeth together to keep from crying out.

I didn't - I couldn't - bother to do more than shove my offending pants down to where my knees met the bed before nestling back down into the cradle of her thighs. The feel of her skin against mine was heaven and I pressed my aching hardness against the slippery cleft beckoning me forward as her firm thighs slid up my flanks in what to my mind was infuriatingly practiced ease.

The reality of Padme was so much more than I'd ever imagined. A thousand fantasies had fueled my desire over the years but none could hold a candle to what it actually felt like to taste and caress her flesh, to have her beneath me flushed and trembling. I'd found my home at long last and I would fight tooth and nail for it. And yet . . . one nagging hurt was digging at me, marring this otherwise perfect moment; the insistent gnawing pain in my heart reminding me I wouldn't be her first.

With that venomous thought the victorious flood of emotions slammed into a wall of doubt and my internal triumphant cry was silenced in favor of the hateful voice which refused me contentment. The empty hollowness in my chest echoed over and over while cruel taunting laughter filled my head. It seemed no matter how hard I tried I couldn't escape the anguished knowledge that someone else had taken what was supposed to have been mine alone.

I pulled away from her enveloping warmth to stare down into the face that had enslaved me on first sight and coldness swept through me, freezing my blood, and slowing the beat of my damaged heart to a slow, heavy thump. With a cynical eye, I surveyed the beautiful dishevelment before me; pink tinged cheeks, kiss swollen mouth, chocolate tangle of disordered curls framing a face lit with desire, and suddenly I hated the dreamy expression, hated it because another man had seen her face soften and her eyes glow with that same rapturous wonder. Jealousy tore at my insides, the razor sharp claws carelessly shredding my heart into tattered strips. Completely oblivious, Padme let out a drawn out sigh as her eyelids fluttered close and her hands slid over my shoulders, tentatively kneading my tension riddled muscles.

A ball of acid formed in my stomach, bubbling and burning, gluttonously eating away at the tender lining. Her sigh seemed to carry more than just a released breath. Was she imagining she was with another man? My stomach lurched violently at the thought and the simmering resentment which had been churning all evening reached critical mass. Any malingerer feelings of arrogant triumph vanished in the swift conflagration, leaving a smoky ruin in its wake.

She was shutting me out! I had no way of knowing if she was thinking of someone else or if she were trying to distance herself from what was happening. Sharing was second nature to me, it was something I'd always done without hesitation or thought, but Padme was mine, damn it! I wanted all of her, all the time, and I drew the line at sharing her - even with her memories. There would be no other men in our bed, I swore angrily.

"Padme, no!"

My harshly snapped demand startled her and her eyes flew open. The question hovering in the twin pools of tawny brown faded with the rest of my words. "Don't close your eyes. I want you to know exactly who's inside you - that it's me giving you this pleasure and no one else."

Force help me, Padme tried to say something then but I wasn't in the mood to hear it. I smothered her attempted words with an angry kiss, effectively stealing her breath and defiance at the same time. An almost inhuman sounding groan reverberated from me, and then I was slanting my mouth over hers, coercing her lips apart, delving into the sweet, moist warmth that mixed so well with the faint intimate traces still clinging to my tongue. I couldn't seem to get enough of her and I relentlessly deepened the kiss, sucking her tongue into my mouth, nibbling, stroking, and tasting, forcing her head back until the mattress refused to give any further.

A shudder wracked me as my straining erection twitched impatiently, begging to be allowed to plunge into paradise. Sweat was beading on my brow and my muscles shook with excited tension as I roughly pried Padme's hands one at a time from where they were clutching - or pushing? - at my shoulders. Without breaking the kiss, her smothered cries arousing and prodding me on, I deliberately laced our fingers together and then firmly pressed first one and then the other arm down against the mattress at either side of her head.

Once again I drew back, reluctantly releasing the mouth I'd been plundering so ruthlessly, nipping at her lips as our tongues untangled. Our jagged breathing drowned out all other sounds; the dying storm, the rattle of the windows, and the breathless, too-soft words tumbling from Padme like a prayer.

A swirl of vertigo hit. I was drowning in the inarticulate whimpers and sighs, the incredible heat created as flesh melded with flesh; drowning in the scent of Padme and of sex. Red hot shivers of lust raced straight to my engorged cock and I finally yielded to the desperate need hovering along the dark edges of my consciousness.

Now, the commanding voice hissed, it has to be now!

A guttural groan shook me and then I rolled my hips forward, sliding my length into Padme's giving flesh for the first time. And gods, it was so much more than I could have imagined - the unbelievable heat, the wet tightness of her walls squeezing me, seducing me with their addictive pleasures. I thrust deeper even as somewhere in my head a warning began to sound, part of me registering the stiffening of Padme's body, the ragged intake of breath which turned into a strangled little cry. In their entwined clasp, her hands clenched at mine in a grip of death, fingernails piercing my vulnerable skin while her neck arched into a sharp crescent.

All the telltale signs whirled around in my befuddled mind but failed to fall in place in time. Compelled by the driving primal need setting my blood on fire, I drove in and unwittingly broke through the undeniable barrier that separated an untried girl from a woman and didn't stop until my cock was buried to the hilt, encased within her velvety core. Only then did I still, my body rigid with shock at what my mind was telling me.

Disbelief coursed through me. A virgin. Padme was a virgin. The clues had been there for me to read but in my jealous stupor, my righteous indignation, I hadn't seen them, had likely refused to see them. The phantom men I'd tortured myself with, and punished her for, dissipated like smoke in the wind. But my passion, my needful desire, remained a raging storm just waiting to be fully unleashed.

Still, I needed confirmation. I'd never been with a virgin before, not once.

"You've never . . . ?" I breathed half to myself, a kind of awed reverence creeping into my voice. Inside my chest my heart was threatening to explode from the whirlwind of emotions assailing me.

Padme gave a minute shake of her head, tendrils of rich brown hair clinging lovingly to her damp skin, and then she gasped anew as my anxious body wrestled control away from my numb brain and instinctively ground against her of its own volition. And just as instinctively, her body arched upwards invitingly, pressing against me with wanton promise, and though I didn't think it was possible, the action sent me slipping further inside her. I gritted my teeth together, the tendons in my neck chording and tightening as her pulsing walls massaged me with brazen enticement, practically begging me to proceed. A moan filled with a primeval desperation was torn from me.

A virgin. Why hadn't she said anything? I'd given her a chance, hadn't I?

I lay there burrowed deep inside Padme, balanced between two worlds, waiting for the self disgust to set in, listening for the berating voice to start up, but neither made an appearance. The momentary doubts whispering through my mind came to a sudden and abrupt halt as I came to the dumbfounded realization that I didn't feel what I knew deep down I should. I couldn't bring myself to be sorry or apologetic. The guilty remorse which should've gripped me in a crippling embrace never materialized. I searched my conscience frantically - and found nothing remotely regretful. All I felt was triumph, satisfaction, and the overwhelming instinct to take, to have, to move inside her, to possess, to stake my claim and brand her as mine.

Not for a single second did I consider retreating. A virgin, the darkness crowed in delight and my only reply to it was an arrogant inward hiss. "Good."

My head dipped down so my lips could graze the outer folds of her ear, my hot breath drawing forth an aroused shiver and a choked back rendition of my name.

"I'm sorry it hurt but I'm not sorry it happened." I nuzzled the side of my face against hers, savoring the feel and texture as her skin slid along mine. "You won't be sorry either, Padme, I promise."

The sultry smile that curled my lips sent another tremor through her as I shifted my weight so I could look into her eyes. Despite her denials, despite her determination to put duty and responsibility before all else, Padme was there. She was underneath me, soaked and ready, with my cock gloved tightly inside her where no other man had ever been. Mine, shouted every cell in my body in a triumphant and primitive battle cry.

The first stroke brought a surprised gasp from between her parted lips and in the tangle of our hands her fingers tightened around mine in panicked apprehension. That betraying action more than anything reminded me to go slow, to ignore the carnal instinct to invade her without mercy. So I set a languid rolling rhythm of give and take; a slow steady stroking that soon had her flushed and writhing, a frenzy of panting cries working their way up to sing in my ears.

With each thrust I scrutinized Padme's face with avid eyes, noting every flicker, every subtle shift and nuance in her expression, almost daring her to look away. Brown swirling pools, darkened to black with newly discovered desire pulled me down into their alluring depths and I

went willingly, sinking below the surface with animalistic grunts. I watched as I took the gift I had been so sure she'd presented to another. I watched as I desecrated her innocence forever. I watched and I rejoiced that my premonition hadn't been wrong, that this beautiful creature was meant for me just as the Force had predicted.

As we moved together, passion didn't even begin to describe the intensity of my feelings. I became convinced my heart would beat out of my chest, escaping its prison of bone and flesh as the feral part of my soul claimed its mate. With each plunge into her wet core, Padme's body answered the call, recognizing its other half, pulling me in, clenching around my pumping shaft with a hunger I knew all too well. The tempestuous joining of our bodies was the sound of flesh hitting flesh, needy cries mixing with panting breaths, and the sensual friction spawning sparks of heat and light before my eyes.

I ground against her tight bud with every downward stroke, stretching her, filling her to completion. A growl of male possession escaped me and at last I succumbed and gave myself free reign to increase the pace, imposing my dominance in the ancient erotic dance.

"This, Padme, this is what that dress was worn for." I purred in a voice thick with lust. "Some part of you knew it - knew what a man would think when he saw you in it. I should get a medal for the effort it took to keep from laying you on the table and having you right there for anyone to see."

The provocative words worked their magic and Padme suddenly tautened, bucking hard, her fingernails digging once more into the skin on the backs of my hands as the first quakes began to ripple through her.

I crashed my lips down over hers, my tongue thrusting into the silky heat of her inviting mouth, drinking down the sweet screams as her inner muscles clenched violently around my throbbing hardness. The feel of Padme coming undone triggered my own release, the building pressure exploding in a miasma of brilliant colors behind my eyelids and a fiery crackling zinging through every nerve ending like jolts of electricity. Shudder after shudder shook me as my seed erupted into her waiting warmth in thick, hot spurts. I threw back my head, a roar of exultation vibrating along my vocal cords as her silken walls milked me, greedily taking everything I had to offer until there was nothing left.

We came to rest in tumble of sweat-kissed skin, lungs laboring for every breath while our bodies trembled from the aftershocks of our joining. I buried my face against the downy skin of her neck, absorbing the scent of sexual surrender enveloping us, basking in the drowsy afterglow seeping into every limb. Contentment colored my thoughts leaving me as lethargic as a sated beast of the wild.

I reluctantly untangled one hand from Padme's, wincing slightly as her fingernails released themselves from where they had broken through my skin, and awkwardly pulled the sheet over us to ward off the middle of the night chill creeping through the room. The sensation of a palm skimming sleepily down the slope of my back, a soft mumbling of my name brushing through my damp hair was the last thing I remember before the gaping maw of exhaustion dragged me down into the black void of sleep.

Chapter 7: A Decision

***"Alas, hearts do not in eyes shine,
Nor can you more judge woman's thoughts by tears,
Than by her shadow, what she wears."***

John Donne

"It could be us against them. All you have to do is let me in."

The memory of Anakin's seductive entreaty scudded along the shadowed fringes of my mind like a spectral wraith and despite the heated body fit snug against my back, a cold shiver of apprehension wended its way through me. Outside the storm had finally ended but within my heart another one brewed.

What had I done?

I struggled to swallow the rising lump of panic threatening to choke me while my macabre mind haphazardly attempted to make some sort of sense of the events leading to my current predicament.

It was all a blur of disjointed images and scenes: the sudden storm raging like a banshee, Anakin watching me with dangerous glittering eyes, the kiss that had stolen my breath and all chances of voicing any believable objections, and all those things he had murmured to me in that voice, that smoky voice that had set off such violent flutters of desire deep in my belly. He had woven a spell around me with his captivating words, using them with skillful ease to wrap me in soothing comfort, to warm me from the inside out until all sensible thoughts had been obliterated beneath the crushing weight of his seductive call.

I had never thought of myself as weak willed but I deserved that moniker after what I had let transpire. Looking back it seemed to have happened with unbelievable speed - Anakin there, in my room, pressing onwards like a one-man invading army. Each action and subsequent reaction building on itself like a snowball barreling down a hill, the once manageable situation picking up momentum, growing larger and larger, moving faster and faster until stopping it was impossible. The dizzying whirl of events had sent common sense fleeing while my traitorous heart overthrew years of disciplined rule to let chaos reign supreme. With his sultry caresses and silky smooth words, Anakin had devastated me, easily suppressing every act of rebellion I tried to summon. Under the power of Anakin's sensual enchantment I let every opportunity to stop him trickle away like sand through my fingers.

Hot mouth, ravenous and unrelenting, slanting over mine again and again.

Determined hands first luring me forwards and then later trapping me - roaming over my body with a consummate skill most women only dreamed of experiencing.

Lips and tongue working tandem as erotic instruments to awaken a hitherto unknown internal hunger . . . tidal waves of tactile sensations pushing me to the edge of my limits until I could not bear to contain the cries of pleasure burning in my chest like fire.

The haunting tableau abruptly shattered when Anakin mumbled something in his sleep and I was jerked sharply back to the present. Every muscle froze in sudden apprehension and I held my breath. Not now, I prayed feverishly, not yet. I needed more time to gather my jumbled

thoughts before facing him again. My composure was in shambles and I was desperately afraid I would not be able to find the conviction with which to dissuade him from dreams of a future that could never be. This . . . tryst did not change anything, I reminded myself determinedly. I tried to ignore the mocking laughter echoing softly in my head.

There was another incomprehensible mutter from behind me and then Anakin nuzzled his face deeper into my tangled curls and settled back down with a contented sigh. Only when it became apparent he was not on the verge of awakening did I give my stiffened limbs permission to relax from their tension-riddled state. But no amount of effort could temper the rush of desire stirred by my traitorous thoughts nor ease the sated soreness in never before used muscles. I stifled a moan. Gods, how could I relax when it still felt as if he were inside me?

Moist puffs of air escaping from Anakin's sleep parted lips tickled along my scalp, warming the crown of my head and sending new ripples of awareness rolling beneath my skin. The knowledge that even in sleep he commanded my body's attention sent waves of resentment coursing through me, and without meaning to, I found myself using his own familiar refrain. It's not fair! I had sacrificed so much for the good of others and now I would have to do it again. No matter how much I wanted it to be otherwise the door Anakin had opened had to be closed for both our sakes.

So while Anakin enjoyed his restful sleep as if he did not have a care in the universe, I concentrated on the dark veil of shadows cloaking the far side of the room, using the obscured focal point to will my heart and too-rapid breathing to slow and then steady. I shoved the enticing pleasure-filled memories away and doggedly tamped down hard on the unwelcome throb of arousal pulsing its insistent ache between my legs.

Dwelling on what had happened would do me no good. I had to decide on a course of action and stick to it. The mistake I had made would have to be rectified without compounding the error further. And it would be so easy to do that, to simply slip again and let Anakin lead this insane dance. He had the power to make me forget my principles, my duties . . . myself. Who was I if I was not Senator Amidala?

I dug down deep and tried to find the defensive mental armor I had donned when he had first confessed his feelings but it was difficult to think of practicalities when being held in your first lover's embrace. The casual arm Anakin had thrown possessively over my waist was like a comforting shackle, heavy and confining, protective yet ultimately restraining. Our clasped hands, fingers laced together in an uneasy reminder of our intimate joining of not more than an hour or so ago, nestled snugly against the bare flesh showing just above my sheet-draped breasts. I could feel the erratic thumping of my heart beneath my palm and I wondered if a broken heart beat with the same fierceness.

"All you have to do is let me in." My memory mocked.

Oh yes, it would be so easy to fall under the bewitchment of love's spell, to just let the warm waters close over my head and sink to the bottom wrapped in a pair of strong arms as if nothing else but the two of us existed. The Jedi holding me close was beyond my experience. Anakin loved with an unabashed enthusiasm that was both flattering and unsettling, the absolute adoration, the unfettered passion was too much; too hungry, too overwhelming, too frightening.

"It wouldn't have to be that way. We could keep it a secret."

Almost instantly my lips twisted into a wry smile. I had always been so good at avoiding emotional entanglements, at keeping my personal life separate from the role I served, first as queen and now as senator. My indulgence in an occasional flirtation at an official function or a few stolen kisses at some senatorial ball had left me ill equipped to deal with Anakin and his ruthless pursuit. Sab had warned me on numerous occasions that my success had only been due to the fact I had felt nothing but the mildest of affections for past suitors but I had scoffed at her claim. At the venerable age of twenty-four, I had become overly confident in the control I had over my emotions. How she would laugh should she discover the identity of my seducer. I could hear her words as clearly as if she were standing next to the bed.

"Ani? The little boy from Tatooine? Padme Naberrie! You turned your nose up at the senator from Corellia - the most incredible looking man I have ever seen, and who do you end up in bed with? Little Ani?"

Sab's accusations that I had yet to meet my match now proved true. All this time I thought I knew everything and it turned out I knew absolutely nothing. Bitter recriminations bounced in my head. She would not understand. How could she when even I did not fully comprehend how the little boy I had befriended so long ago had succeeded where no one else had.

Love was not what I had been taught it was all these years. It bore little resemblance to the flowery descriptions detailed in the romantic classics that all young girls devour as readily as sweets. The elegant prose in those much beloved tomes had lied and deceived with their promised ideals, offering up a reality that never existed. The veil of girlish notions behind which I had remained cloistered had been ripped from me by a sinfully skilled mouth, strong hands that knew my body with haunting familiarity, and a pair of feverish blue eyes that set me on fire with a single glance.

Lies, all lies.

Love was not gentle and sweet as extolled by authors of old. Nor was it comfortable and safely familiar as demonstrated by the witnessed unions of friends and family. Instead it was raw, dangerous and terrifying in its intensity and power; wild and uncontrollable in its assault on my senses. Anakin's brand of love knocked me off my feet and swept me out into a bottomless sea of dark excitement and shattering unpredictability. Being desired by him was a cataclysmic fury that raged and burned, threatening to consume everything in its path until nothing was left but a constant ache, an ache that refused to allow body and mind a moment's peace.

I recalled Anakin's reaction when he discovered I had never been with anyone else and my cynical smile turned into a frown. He had regretted the unavoidable pain he had caused but he had not been sorry for the aggressive siege he had unremorsefully waged. The gleam of territorial pride lighting his eyes from within and the satisfied male triumph etched in every line of his face had told their own story. He had not said it but the word mine had screeched loudly in my head and each rendition had sounded more possessive than the last.

I slowly eased our joined hands away from where they rested and let my gaze idly trace the lines of his tanned fingers where they threaded through mine. The calluses on his palm and thumb pad were rough against my skin and I marveled at the hours and hours of light saber practice that had gone into creating them. Such strong hands, I thought wonderingly, hands that could be gentle or rough, tender or demanding, loving or punishing. Short nails, long graceful fingers . . . a blush automatically spread across my face as I remembered the pleasure Anakin was capable of giving with those fingers.

You were meant for me, I'll prove it to you.

A tiny nervous tremor curled in my stomach. I was his and I always would be after tonight. Another jolt of sheer panic shot through me, and this time I could not push it down. The truth settled on my chest like a lead weight and suddenly I could not breathe.

Pulling away from the cocooning warmth of his body, I impatiently tugged my hand free and threw off the heavy arm keeping me close. A sleepy grunt sounded but I was past caring whether I disturbed the man at my side, all I could concentrate on was trying to dislodge the oppressive pressure crushing my chest. I sat up hurriedly, wincing as my hair reluctantly pulled free from beneath the trap of Anakin's cheek. Fighting for breath, I worked desperately to draw air into my lungs, clutching the bed sheet protectively to my chest in two tight fists. Realization slammed into me like an asteroid against the hull of a ship.

"Then you do feel something!"

Feel something? How weak that sounded in the face of what I now knew in my heart to be true. Despite the impossibilities and utter lack of cause, I loved him - Anakin Skywalker, a Jedi Padawan who would never be free to be his own person or be allowed to have any acknowledged attachments. Even should I fall in with his outrageous suggestion nothing good could come of it. Ultimately I would be a hindrance to him, a burden he would eventually come to resent. His dearest wish was to become a Jedi Knight. How could I take that away from him? There was no happy future for us, not with whom we were and the parts we seemed destined to play. Why could he not see that?

I knew I could not move backwards by turning back time and pretending I was the same person who just the night before had stood firm in her convictions. And yet, neither could I do an about face and fall in with the web of lies Anakin would surely propose again the moment the sun rose.

"A day hasn't gone by when I haven't thought about you."

Gods, I loved him but I had no choice except to give him up. And it was going to hurt so much more now that I had yielded and done what I swore not to do. There was no use in railing against the injustice of it all. Anakin was incapable of being rational about me, he had admitted that the previous night, and so it was left to me to administer a painful dose of reality. Again.

An inquiring touch at my back immediately stiffened my spine and I swallowed a startled gasp. I did not dare turn around to meet those eyes that could see far too much with a single penetrating glance.

"What's wrong?"

I almost laughed out loud at his question, only managing at the last minute to quell the hysterical bubble of laughter welling up inside. Anakin had turned my world upside down and nothing would ever be right again and he wanted to know what was wrong?

Closing my eyes, I tried to gather my scattered wits, a task made all the more difficult when Anakin began to gently run his hand in soothing circles at the small of my back. The delicate shiver I was helpless to suppress drew forth a low sound of approval and the arrogance of it

shored up my crumbling resolve.

"This cannot happen again, Anakin. You know that, don't you?" The hand at my back faltered briefly and then resumed its absent caressing. The warmth of his touch sent tingles of desire crawling along each nerve ending.

"If that's what you want."

I sighed resignedly. "It does not matter what I want, or what you want. Our lives are not simple. Neither of us is free."

"Our lives could be that simple if you'd just let them be."

"Anakin, how can you . . ." I stopped and after taking a steadying breath began again. "I meant what I said. It will not work and I cannot live in a world of lies."

"So you're telling me that what happened tonight meant nothing to you?" Anakin asked woodenly.

Helpless anger flared and I turned to look at him over my shoulder. "You of all people should know that's not true." I ripped my gaze away and turned quickly back to contemplate the less threatening view of the dark room with unseeing eyes.

"I know."

The unspoken satisfaction flavoring that simple sentence annoyed me and instantly raised my hackles. Smug boy, I muttered to myself.

The bed abruptly shifted beneath Anakin's weight as he sat up. My irritation faded and I was immediately on my guard.

"I didn't hurt you, did I? I mean other than . . ." His voice trailed off and he sounded like the Anakin of long ago, like the boy who no longer existed. Long fingers began to trace my spine slowly upwards.

"No." It cost me a great deal to get the word out without giving in to the breathlessness his touch was inspiring.

"Are you sorry?"

"I never said 'no'. I could have stopped you if I had really wanted to." I hedged, finally admitting the truth to myself.

Behind me Anakin remained unaccountably silent but his fingers continued their exploration by moving a little higher. The non-response sent a frisson of unease prickling along the nape of my neck. I swallowed uncertainly as a disturbing thought occurred to me.

"You would have stopped if I had wanted you to, wouldn't you?"

Another long moment of silence stretched out before Anakin finally replied hesitantly, almost as if he were talking to himself.

"Of course I would have."

He meant it, I told myself heatedly but my fingers tightened convulsively around the edges of the sheet, my knuckles growing white with the effort. In sharp brilliant flashes I saw again the proprietary way he had looked at me as I stood with my back to the storm; saw the pain and determination hardening his face when he demanded I meet his gaze; saw the sensual curve of his lips as he whispered his love. Once more I felt the scorching heat of his flesh on mine, the strength of his grip around my wrists, his mouth at my breast and the way he had filled me so completely. He would have, I insisted again as my breath started to come in short jerky pulls.

Who exactly are you trying to convince? my inner voice whispered with a mocking edge.

Through sheer force of will I thrust my doubts aside and tried to concentrate on the matter at hand - namely, breaking two hearts at once. Before I could formulate my next thought, Anakin let out a heavy sigh as if he had come to some sort of painful decision.

"Padme?"

I cocked my head slightly to signal I was listening. I did not trust my voice at that particular moment.

"You've made your decision and even though I think you're making a mistake, I won't push you further." In one of his startling transformations, Anakin was suddenly back to the awkward boy-man who had acted so perplexed and disarmingly sweet after I had broken our first kiss and told him I should not have allowed it to happen.

Despite the sincerity of his words, the seriousness of his tone, my wariness only eased a fraction. After all, he had agreed with me before only to show up mere hours later with far from respectable intentions, not to mention a host of misguided accusations.

I was right to be cautious for even as he appeared to accept defeat, with the words still hovering in the air around us, he moved the heavy curtain of my hair aside to expose my bare back. At the same moment his lips began to press soft, open-mouth kisses along one naked shoulder, I heard a soft swooshing noise but then forgot all about it when Anakin reached the base of my neck and drew in the soft skin with a sharply delicious suck.

I stifled a whimper as he used his teeth and tongue to arouse me with worrying ease and as the electric sensations built I could not stop my head from falling helplessly back onto his muscled shoulder with a thud. He owns you, taunted the part of me still capable of rational thought. When the hand responsible for sweeping my hair out of the way slipped down and around to cup one breast, I gasped in both pleasure and useless protest.

"Anakin." My lips brushed against his cheek, the intended admonishment coming out on a telling moan. Any weight it might have carried was swept away when my body instinctively arched into his touch.

With a playful bite at the area he had just marked, he left the sensitive spot and worked his way up my neck. It should be illegal to use your tongue and teeth with such skill, I thought as my breath sawed in and out of my chest.

"We still have the rest of the night." Anakin breathed as his hand began to easily work the sheet from my loosening grip. A cool rush of air signaled he had won the battle and my nipples, already aroused by his actions, tightened painfully. "Do something for me, Padme, since you say this can't happen again."

My muddled mind took in his words but it was difficult to concentrate with his warm hand kneading my breast so insistently, his thumb and forefinger teasing the swollen peak with devastating precision. It was also impossible to disregard the persistent nudge of his hardened length at my back.

"Wh-what?" I choked out.

Anakin's remaining free hand brought up a fist full of black material into my line of vision. The bottom of my stomach dropped as I focused on the accursed evening gown. The source of the swooshing noise suddenly was glaringly obvious. More Jedi tricks.

With hot, moist breath caressing my ear, he purred his decadent request. "Put this back on and let me show you all the things I wanted to do to you from the moment you opened your door."

"Oh gods." I hissed as my body flamed with a heady mixture of lust and desire. The blood in my veins turned from viscous and slow to a raging river of fire. And deep within an insatiable curiosity for the wicked unknown rose up to guide my actions. I reached out with a trembling hand, my fingers closing slowly around the slick leather with only the briefest of hesitations. The musky, masculine scent of Anakin filled my nostrils as I pulled away from the heat of his body and then twisted to meet his hooded stare.

I looked down at the dress now clutched in both my hands and then back up at Anakin. A small flush gathered over my body and I glanced away again, unable to look at the hunger sharpening his face. He had the sexual confidence and skill of a man twice his age. Where did it come from? A sharp twinge of jealousy lanced my heart. Who else had he practiced it on?

"Will you?"

His hand reached out and cupped my cheek, gently bringing me back to face him. I stared into the depths of his cobalt blue eyes and became mesmerized at the wealth of emotions swirling in their depths. A few more hours, it will not change anything, my heart promised as if my mind did not remember the last time it lied like that. I ignored the danger instinct urgently warning me I was acting on emotion instead of common sense. I ignored twenty-four years of morality and my ingrained sense of duty. Instead I went with my heart and the desire thrumming through me like an addictive drug. Fool, my mind shouted. But I barely heard it over the blood roaring in my ears.

I took a deep breath and then plunged ahead without looking either left or right, not even caring that I was throwing myself off a cliff. "You'll have to help me with the laces." I said in a breathless rush before my courage failed.

Anakin's lips curled in a victorious smile. His smoldering gaze never left my face as he plucked the gown from my unresisting and slightly damp grip.

"I think that can be arranged, milady. Now, turn around."

Chapter 8: Unknowing Capitulation

"The truth is rarely pure and never simple."

Oscar Wilde

The storm of the night before had broken sometime in the early morning hours and now the sun glowed softly as it began its ascension up into the soft lavender-blue sky laced with puffy clouds. Ghostly white wisps of mist drifted across the surface of the lake, spun sugar reflected in glass, and a lone bird swooped across the smooth surface with a melancholy cry. I was aware of everything around me but at the same time it was faded and unsubstantial like a remnant from a dream. Only the man in front of me was real. His pain was a living, breathing thing, a black oppressive cloud that darkened his features and weighed me down.

"I saw my mother. She's suffering, Padme. I saw her as clearly as I see you now. She's in pain. I know it's disobeying my mandate to protect you, Senator, but I have to go. I have to help her." He trained his broken blue eyes on my face and the bleak desperation nearly sent me to my knees. "I have to go to her. I have no choice."

The words were pulled out of me before I was even aware of them forming. "I will go with you."

There was a sudden fierceness about him, a flash of something indefinable that sparked in his eyes like an exploding star and then he crossed the short distance separating us in one stride. The gratitude flooding his face held me captivated in a suspended moment in time. But when Anakin tried to slip his hands around my waist and draw me to him, I stopped him. Catching his hands before they could find their intended target, I gently but firmly pushed them away. "I am going with you, Anakin but as a friend and nothing more."

A crooked smile full of heat pulled the corners of his mouth up but he did not try to reach for me again. Instead the cold hand of despair seized me in its tight grip as my future suddenly stretched out before me - an empty, lonely existence with no end. You are doing the right thing, whispered my conscience. But if that were true why did I feel dead inside at the prospect of never again knowing Anakin's touch? It seemed I was damned no matter which path I took so would it not be better to go down in flames rather than slowly freezing to death?

Anakin's warm palm curved around my cheek and it took all my strength not to lean into his touch. At that moment I wanted nothing more than to drag him back in my room and stay there forever.

"As friends then." Anakin said simply and then he leaned in and placed a gentle kiss on my brow.

It was all so sweet and incredibly easy - too easy. After the passion of last night was I really expected to believe he was just giving up? I watched his tall figure walk away from me, his mind already moving a parsec a minute as he planned our imminent departure, and I felt a chill of premonition tingle down my back.

Anakin would try again, of that I had no doubt. But he would do so whether we were on Naboo or Tatooine, I reminded myself. At least on Tatooine he would be distracted by the reunion with

his mother.

His haunting words came back to me. "She's suffering, Padme. I saw her as clearly as I see you now. She's in pain."

I simply refused to consider that even should his dreams prove true we would not reach her in time. Considering the idea that Shmi was anything but safe and well was too awful to dwell upon and I dreaded what any other circumstance would do to Anakin. The guilt of leaving his mother behind had eaten away at him for ten years but if he were to lose her now I could not fathom what he would feel. I shuddered. He would look for someone to blame, someone to make pay if he lost her through anything but natural causes. Anakin was impetuous and rash. He had a short rein on his temper despite being a Jedi. What would he do to those responsible?

I moved to the balcony and absently tore off a leaf from one of the clinging vines, ripping it into little pieces before letting the bits of green fall from my hand. I watched them flutter in the breeze as they floated down towards the water and tried to fight the numbness invading my soul.

Everything was so fragile, so delicate. In the blink of an eye a living thing could be pulled away from its surroundings and callously destroyed on nothing more than a whim. Below me the tiny pieces of leaf swirled and then disappeared beneath the surface as if they had never existed. After a long moment of staring at nothing, I turned and followed Anakin inside. I turned and followed my heart.

The End

Feedback very much appreciated.